

CORRECTED VERSION

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, INFRASTRUCTURE AND OUTER SUBURBAN/INTERFACE SERVICES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Marine Rescue Services in Victoria

Geelong — 18 March 2014

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Mr Ray Shaw, Board Member and Chairman of Risk and Safety Management Committee

Royal Geelong Yacht Club

Vice-Commodore Chris Williams

The CHAIR — Good afternoon. My name is Neale Burgess, the member for Hastings and the chair of this committee. Welcome to this hearing of the all-party Economic Development, Infrastructure and Outer Suburban/Interface Services Committee and its inquiry into marine rescue services in Victoria. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, comments you make outside this meeting will not be afforded the same privilege. Could I ask you both to state your full names, your addresses and whether you are appearing on behalf of an organisation?

Mr SHAW — Steve Walker, who is the CEO of Yachting Victoria, was invited. I am Ray Shaw, a board member, and I am representing Yachting Victoria. As well as a board member, I am chairman of their risk and safety management committee. I am also the rear commodore of the Ocean Racing Club of Victoria, which organises all of the offshore sailing activities. Yachting Victoria is the body that coordinates all of the yachting activities within Victoria.

Vice-Commodore WILLIAMS — I am Chris Williams. I am the vice commodore of Royal Geelong Yacht Club. In that role I chair a number of committees, in particular the cruising group, which operates events based within Port Phillip and into Bass Strait, Tasmania and beyond.

The CHAIR — Can we have your addresses?

Mr SHAW —

Vice-Commodore WILLIAMS —

The CHAIR — I invite you both to make an oral submission, and we will ask questions either during or afterwards, if that is okay.

Mr SHAW — Unlike the previous group, we are not providers of services. We are consumers of services, of course, because our members are sailors who go out in the bay or on the ocean and sometimes get into difficulty and need help. We are very much interested in the services that are available to our members.

The CHAIR — Of course.

Mr SHAW — I was forwarded questions about the services that are available and what have you, so I have put together a presentation based around those questions, if we could run through that.

The CHAIR — Sure.

Overheads shown.

Mr SHAW — The first question was, ‘Is the current range of services fit for purpose?’. On this I looked at, ‘What about, first of all, within Port Phillip?’. I think generally they are pretty good. The coverage and capability, I think, is good overall, at least during the peak times. You might question during the night or in winter, but certainly during the day and in summer in particular it is not too bad. At other times it is not as good, but it is still not bad. They are really services provided by VicPol and by volunteer organisations on the bay and offshore, as we have just heard from our Ocean Grove friends. Yacht clubs themselves provide services, of course, during their operating hours, and there are other people, like Lonsdale, VTS and the Coast Guard. The only issue you might think about on the bay is the asset distribution around the bay. The police are very active up in Williamstown. They are not as prevalent in other parts of the bay; in fact the very big boat that they have sits at Williamstown most of the time. That is one question that might come to mind about — —

The CHAIR — Do you have a view about where that should sit?

Mr SHAW — It is an ocean-going boat, so it should sit down near the heads — although I am hearing from the Ocean Grove guys that it does spend some time at Swan Island, at least over the Christmas period, so that is good. But it is an ocean-capable vessel, so it should be in the ocean.

When we go to coastal waters, the situation is not as good. There are very few, if any, all-weather vessels along the coast. As the Ocean Racing Club we had an incident a couple of years ago where a boat sank off Port Fairy, and there was no vessel able to get out there at all. The Warrnambool Coast Guard could not get there. There were no other vessels. It was 60 knots in 10-metre seas, to be fair, but that happens, and that is when boats get

into trouble. We had six people in the water, and we had to rely on another yacht rescuing it. Fortunately they did it, but they were very lucky. There were no boats capable of helping them at that time.

The CHAIR — What is the answer to that?

Mr SHAW — Of course other parts of the world have vessels that are distributed along the coastline that are capable of going out in those seas. The royal lifeboat system in the UK is a great example of that. We really have nothing in Victoria that is capable of going out there. We rely on either big ships at sea or other boats, of course, that can help them. In some cases the local organisations can, but when the conditions get rough enough, as we have just heard, it is very difficult, particularly at night.

Mr McGUIRE — Just before you move on, who were the people who were out in those conditions?

Mr SHAW — That was in an organised race where the weather came through above what was forecast in terms of wind and sea. The wind was forecast to be 30 or 40 knots; it finished up at 60. The seas were forecast to be up to 8 metres and finished up over 10, and the boat sunk. There were some reasons why it should not have sunk, but it did, so there was some error there, but it happened.

Mr McGUIRE — That is all I am trying to establish — how rare these things are or how likely they are to occur. You are really saying that the onus of deciding whether that race goes ahead is a judgement made by whoever is in charge on the day.

Mr SHAW — Absolutely. The Ocean Racing Club, which I am a representative of as well, does have very well-defined processes for deciding whether to run a race or not, but we rely on the bureau for forecasts and things like this, and it turns out they were wrong, so we finished up in extreme conditions. Chris might also mention that he was involved in something with the Geelong yacht club.

Vice-Commodore WILLIAMS — During February we had a cruise to Flinders Island, and on the first night out from Queenscliff we lost a powerboat on the shore near Cape Liptrap in 30-knot winds. There were anchor problems, and the boat ran aground and broke up. Fortunately both the crew were quite safe. Basically they were able to step off onto the beach, but that was in the middle of the night, and the radio system in Victoria was inadequate. We will talk a little about that later.

A fortnight later we were at Deal Island, which is out 60 miles south-east of Wilsons Prom. We were at anchor, sheltering from the weather as forecast. We had consistent winds of 40-plus knots. It was bulletted at 80 knots at anchor, in a bay. One of our yachts dragged in the middle of the night — that is, dragged our anchor. They were trying to reset, and they were lost on the rocks. That was fairly scary. It was terrifying for them. They managed to get in a dinghy and get off and find another yacht in the bay and get on there. There was no capacity to rescue those people from Victoria or anywhere else. In 80 knots you are on your own.

Interestingly, when we were at Refuge Cove on the journey there, Tasmania Police's large motor vessel, *Van Diemen*, came in. To know that there was a vessel of that capacity at your service in most situations — not at your service, but available to assist — would be something to consider for Victoria. We have a very exposed coastline — not many sheltered anchorages or places to hide, particularly if you are there with a few other boats. Everyone is seeking the same protection. Sometimes you just need that large vessel. Perhaps we will come back to the radio later.

Mr RONALDS — Ray, could I just ask you a question? You said there was an organised race — that you were organising that. That is a forecast above a gale. Is it normal to run a race with a forecast above gale?

Mr SHAW — It was not forecast to be — —

Mr RONALDS — You said it was forecast at 40 knots.

Mr SHAW — Yes, that is a gale, but we will send boats out in a gale. We will not send them out in a storm. It finished up in a storm. There was a separate inquiry about this whole incident.

Mr RONALDS — Sure.

Mr SHAW — We will send boats out in a gale, which is above 33 knots — to 45, I think. But it finished up as a storm, and that was above the BOM forecast.

The CHAIR — How often does that happen?

Mr SHAW — How often do we — —

The CHAIR — Is the forecast in error — —

Mr SHAW — The BOM is pretty good these days, you would have to say.

Vice-Commodore WILLIAMS — We had three events in the three weeks we were out. On the first night out it was not in excess by very much, but you get localised weather, like at Refuge Cove at Wilsons Promontory. We had bullets there in excess of 40 knots — yachts keeling over with their gunwales in the water, at anchor and white out. It is quite spectacular when you know you are safe, but if you had been in a powerboat in that situation, it would have been desperately dangerous. Yachts were better off — and then again at Deal. That was 80 knots. That was not forecast, and we were there to hide from that front as it came through, on BOM advice.

Mr SHAW — I think that is a good point. The bureau forecasts are generally pretty good, but they are broad brushed. They cover wide areas, so you can get these localised fronts and squalls and things like that. The forecasting is pretty good, but we have a big coastline and a lot of water, and the forecasts are pretty broad brushed.

The CHAIR — Okay. Continue.

Mr McGuire — I have had a white-knuckle sailing experience to Wilsons Prom and back — don't worry! It was a similar sort of thing.

The CHAIR — White knuckle as opposed to white out!

Mr McGuire — It concentrates your mind.

The CHAIR — It gets your attention. Continue.

Mr SHAW — The next point Chris touched on is that our VHF coverage along the coast is incomplete. It is better than it used to be, so we have some repeaters, but we do not have complete coverage along the coastline. If you do get into trouble, you should be able to call and make some VHF contact. The repeaters should all be linked so that they can be monitored 24/7, as is the case in New South Wales and Tasmania.

The CHAIR — And they are not?

Mr SHAW — Not.

Mr McGuire — Why is that?

Mr SHAW — That is a very good question. I do not know. I do not think they are linked.

Mr RONALDS — I believe they are linked at Sandringham, aren't they?

Mr SHAW — I do not believe so. That is unknown to me — the coastal repeaters?

The CHAIR — We will investigate that.

Mr SHAW — Okay. If they are, that is unknown to me.

The CHAIR — We were given evidence to the contrary, but that is the very reason we are asking these questions.

Mr SHAW — They could be. If they are not, they certainly should be.

The CHAIR — Are they commonly known — the black spots?

Mr SHAW — Probably not. Certainly it is incomplete as you go along the coastline, and they are — —

The CHAIR — Are you able to identify where those black spots are?

Mr SHAW — We could probably find out or at least get some input on that.

The CHAIR — Could you do that for us?

Mr SHAW — Okay. I will certainly ask people to be a bit more specific about it. We can do that.

The CHAIR — That would be very helpful.

Vice-Commodore WILLIAMS — We do listen to volunteer Coast Guard radio. At around 5 o'clock you hear the station saying, 'Coast radio Paynesville is closing down for the night'. Okay, the weather is coming in — what happens then? There is that kind of concern.

The CHAIR — Is that a frequent occurrence?

Vice-Commodore WILLIAMS — Everyday. They are volunteer organisations.

The CHAIR — In the other areas as well?

Vice-Commodore WILLIAMS — All the way along the coast where the volunteer Coast Guard — —

The CHAIR — Even when there is heavy weather?

Vice-Commodore WILLIAMS — I am not there every day, so I cannot generally answer, but that is our experience. Isn't that fantastic for being there at all?

The CHAIR — Absolutely.

Mr McGUIRE — What is your view about that, and therefore what should happen?

Vice-Commodore WILLIAMS — As Ray suggested, have it all linked in so it goes back to a central base automatically and ties in with the right organisations so Victoria Police — —

The CHAIR — Basically like diverting your phone — after a certain time it goes back to central?

Mr SHAW — Exactly.

Vice-Commodore WILLIAMS — Yes. Now some of us are considering the sat phone at 2.00 a.m. to be the solution — call AMSA, search and rescue in Canberra. If you cannot get anyone, you use the sat phone, but not everyone has one of those yet.

Mr McGUIRE — Okay, so there needs to be a coordinated 24/7 communication strategy that everybody knows about — —

Mr SHAW — Correct.

Mr McGUIRE — And then the fallback position is the satnav.

Vice-Commodore WILLIAMS — Satellite phone.

Mr McGUIRE — Satellite phone, sorry.

Vice-Commodore WILLIAMS — I would not be trying to mandate that.

Mr McGUIRE — Forget that Just have the first proposition — —

Vice-Commodore WILLIAMS — The first proposition would be exactly what we need.

The CHAIR — The evidence we have been given says that is what happens — after 5 o'clock it goes back to a centralised phone. Is that not your information?

Mr RONALDS — They are not centralised.

Mr SHAW — Certainly, speaking with my ocean racing club hat on, that is not our understanding. If it is, it is unknown to us.

Mr McGUIRE — And you are the commodore of racing Victoria?

Mr SHAW — No, I am the rear commodore of the ocean racing club, but I organise all the races for the ocean racing club.

Mr McGUIRE — Yes, but if anyone should know, you should know.

Mr SHAW — I would hope so.

Mr McGUIRE — I am just trying to work out where the gaps are, who knows what is going on.

Mr SHAW — Absolutely, you should know. I can certainly canvass our members and get some input on that.

The CHAIR — That would be good.

Mr SHAW — I will certainly do that.

The CHAIR — What we are obviously trying to do is work out — —

Mr SHAW — The black spots.

The CHAIR — What the reality is and what communications problems we have, and we clearly have some.

Vice-Commodore WILLIAMS — A system that no-one knows about is not a system.

Mr SHAW — Correct.

Mr RONALDS — When you are talking about black spots, what sort of distance offshore are you talking about?

Mr SHAW — VHF — —

Mr RONALDS — So within 2 miles?

Mr SHAW — No, 15 miles, 20 miles — something like that. The VHF for yachts should be 20 miles or something like that.

The CHAIR — Please continue.

Mr SHAW — Not 24/7, as we mentioned. We have limited after-dark rescue capacity. We have some planes. When we had our problem down at Port Fairy a couple of years ago AMSA did dispatch a Dornier down there. I think there are no night helicopters that can do offshore rescuing. Police are up there at night, but certainly on that occasion there was no boat and no helicopter that could get out to these people — not at all. The Dornier came out and saw them and located them and all that sort of stuff — —

The CHAIR — Waved at them.

Mr SHAW — Dipped their wings and said hi, but no helicopters and no boats. There were a couple of large cargo ships around, but they were not able to help so it is lucky that we had a couple of boats nearby that could pick them up. We are limited in terms of after-dark rescue capability in bad conditions anyhow — and these were extreme conditions, to be fair — either boats or planes.

One other thing that does happen, particularly on the northern coast, is that you can actually log in and plan your trip and volunteer organisations will keep an eye on you, if you like. That is not organised here in any way, to my knowledge.

Vice-Commodore WILLIAMS — We operate one of our own volition when we go. That is a homemade version, if you like.

Mr SHAW — And there are some. If I am coming back from Hobart at Christmas, I will call into Smithton Radio and say, ‘Okay, I am leaving Hobart, and I will call in twice a day’, but there is nothing that I know of along those lines for Victoria. I do not know if there are any HF stations that we log into at all over the long distance; there are VHF ones, but there is no HF for long distance. There are three or four in Tasmania that we use, but there is nothing on the Victorian coast, to my knowledge, that offers that sort of HF tracking service. There are VHF ones to some extent and, okay, some home-grown ones, but there is nothing really well organised to my knowledge.

Vice-Commodore WILLIAMS — I agree.

Mr SHAW — Okay, so the next question was how could we improve it? A more complete coastal repeater network link, more all-weather vessels. There have been some issues in rescuing where refuelling was a bit of an issue — there are not many places where boats can refuel. That has been an issue in some cases. I do not know much about that, to be honest, but that was one bit of input we had from some of our members — the ability to refuel rescue vessels.

The question was: is there an overlapping of services? The answer is: yes, there is, but that is good. For example, when boats get into trouble offshore, often the first people to hear about it are AMSA, because they have set off an EPIRB or something like that. They are obviously the first port of call, but then they will bring in VicPol and others as needed. That network of organisations seems to work very well and it is pretty well coordinated. That is critical of course because the different organisations — be it the police, be it AMSA, be it the local Coast Guard-type people — have different assets and capabilities, so I think that works pretty well.

Is there a need for more legislation? I think our feeling is the real needs are for more services and capability; the legislation is pretty good. I do not think we need more rules. What we need is — —

The CHAIR — More ability.

Mr SHAW — More capability.

Communications? I have already talked about this — the repeater network. There are a lot of new technologies that are coming to bear now. We do not need to go into these now, but these are things like phones being much more capable these days. In fact when we had our problem at Port Fairy a couple of years ago, it was a mobile phone call that alerted us to the problem because they were not that far offshore. If you have Telstra, particularly, and you are a few miles offshore, you can use your mobile coverage. So there is the capability of using phones for calls. You can also use phones for weather alerts and things like that. There is a lot of technology that can be brought to bear here.

There are other things like GPS of course, and we use GPS tracking — our boats out in the ocean have trackers on them and satellites are watching them — so that is very useful technology. There is other technology like digital selective calling, which is not very well implemented here in Australia. That is a technology that VHF radios have that can be very helpful in safety management. And then there are other technologies like AIS — the Automatic Identification System. These are devices that boats can carry that send out radio signals so that other boats can see them on their plotters. I was talking to the Coast Guard guys; if they had this, they could see where boats are and the boats could see them. There is a lot of technology that is coming around now that can be enabling, and the government would be well advised to be aware of those developments and take full advantage of them.

Mr RONALDS — What do you think of the SafeTrx app? Do you use that?

Mr SHAW — What is that?

Mr RONALDS — Is it the Coast Guard that is doing it?

The CHAIR — Yes.

Mr RONALDS — The Coast Guard is putting it together. You are not aware of it? It is an app.

Mr SHAW — What does it do? Is it a mobile phone — —

Mr RONALDS — Yes, it is a mobile phone app that will allow them to track — —

Mr SHAW — Satellite. Okay. That is the sort of thing I am talking about.

Mr RONALDS — It is interesting that you are not aware of it.

Mr SHAW — I do not know that particular one, but yes, because phones now have GPS in them very often, you can use that sort of technology quite effectively.

The CHAIR — What about peak bodies and communication throughout the industry from a peak body? Does that happen?

Vice-Commodore WILLIAMS — Yes, as a consumer of YV's material at the yacht club level, a lot of that communication goes out in our weekly electronic newsletter.

The CHAIR — But you are not getting that information?

Vice-Commodore WILLIAMS — We publish what they send to us. We publish courses, information bulletins and so on. We have groups within our organisation, like our cruising group, racing and so on, and they have courses that address their needs as well.

Just going to the comments about the technology, perhaps if you are looking at legislation over time, as we have changed the legislation about PFDs and so on, and what is required, maybe over time boats going outside protected waters might be compelled to have AIS, for example, so that we can know where they are when things go terribly wrong and the weather is against us. There are some things like that that most people who go cruising will probably install anyway because they are fantastic in helping you sleep at night knowing that you are stuck on your anchor and not drifting, and if something goes wrong, the AIS tracker will relay your position.

Mr SHAW — For example, for the longer ocean races, that technology is now compulsory, and for races like the Melbourne to Hobart it will be compulsory after 2015, I think. The yachting organisations are forcing it onto the people who do these things, so it is happening and it is very good.

Mr McGUIRE — What would your advice be to us?

Vice-Commodore WILLIAMS — The radio is the one that is at the top of my mind at the moment, from recent experience.

Mr SHAW — Yes, absolutely.

Vice-Commodore WILLIAMS — That covers everyone: if you are in a tinny fishing, it helps you, as well as in your 60-foot pleasure cruiser, so I think it is a universal service.

Mr McGUIRE — So start with the universal service and improve that, even though there is obviously a gap or a disconnect between the information that we are receiving, but we will address that. Then as technology evolves or if we have the use of the technology now, look at whether everybody has the appropriate app would be the next issue.

Vice-Commodore WILLIAMS — I am not so fixated on the mobile phone app, because mobile phones fall out of pockets and go overboard or the batteries go flat. If you have AIS and those sorts of purpose-built devices built into the boat or plugged into the boat, you are better off. The technology — —

Mr McGUIRE — That is an add-on.

Vice-Commodore WILLIAMS — Let us worry about that detail later, but yes, definitely have a future focus for boating safety legislation because boaters are early adopters of technology. Look at the lure industry; they buy stuff all the time.

Mr McGuire — Yes, exactly, that is a good way to put it.

Mr SHAW — It is possible with DSC to give weather alerts. I sail in Europe quite a bit and you are hear those all the time, because DSC is a much more ubiquitous technology or is used much more commonly, so it can be quite effective.

I agree with Chris, the VHF network is no. 1 and then I would just encourage the authorities — the government people — to be very aware of the capabilities that these new technologies are offering and capitalise on them.

The CHAIR — Excellent, did you have more to go?

Mr SHAW — A little bit.

The CHAIR — That is fine.

Mr SHAW — Then there is education — radio training. There are lots of examples of people who are using radios poorly, just not knowing the protocols and what have you. There is room for that, so that the right frequencies are kept free for search and rescue, that people are using them properly and switching to working frequencies when they should, and all that sort of thing. I think there is room for that.

We heard a bit about coxswain training and that is very good. There is also another yachting training course called the safety and sea survival course, which is offered here in Melbourne by the ocean racing club, but there are some other providers as well. That is a course that gives people a bit of an introduction to various aspects of safety such as forecasting, radios, safety equipment, coping with emergencies and all those sorts of things.

TSV do sponsor that. They have grants every year and among them they do sponsor some of that activity, so I would encourage them to do more of that because if you can make people or train people to be more aware of and alert to these impending weather issues, then they are less likely to go out there or be better prepared, and all that sort of thing. That sort of training is very good.

For our ocean racers, half of the crew on boats have to have done that course. It is a requirement and in general it is a good training course, whether you are ocean racing, fishing or what have you, because it teaches you a whole bunch of things about being alert to the weather, how to use equipment and how to deal with the emergencies that happen.

The CHAIR — We received evidence to suggest that the rate of boat registration had gone up quite dramatically, but the rate of boat incidents had gone up significantly more than that. Do you have any comments on that?

Mr SHAW — When I listened to the presentation from TSV last year, my recollection is that the greatest increase is in PWCs and not in boats. It is my recollection that the overall number may have gone up but by far the biggest issue was with jet skis and things like that, whereas the incidence of problems with traditional yachts and particularly yacht clubs was pretty good. That is what I recall from their presentation.

Vice-Commodore WILLIAMS — As a yacht club, we are focused on safety from our juniors aged six, right through. It is always safety and being clipped on, harnessed and PFDs. Following the rules and knowing why you are doing it is essential. Our racing people have safety audits on their boats now, which has come through Yachting Victoria — it is an excellent program, and sailors are adopting it.

We run the Festival of Sails in Geelong every Australia Day weekend. We have 350-plus yachts and we have random safety audits of those yachts, and it has been well received as well. Sailors are becoming more and more safety focused and there is less of the old pirate image, I am somewhat happy to say.

Mr SHAW — The regulations are there within the yachting fraternity, at least within Yachting Victoria and Yachting Australia, and increasingly the focus of those bodies is more towards helping them to develop safety policies and practices to ensure that they are practising these things, and not just ramming rules down their

throats and what have you. We are trying to help people be more proactive in avoiding accidents and developing good safety practices, so that they are less likely to find themselves in these situations and less likely to need the help — but it will still happen.

Mr EIDEH — I want to ask about the training program that is undertaken by the yacht club members, internally and externally. How often does that happen, and how often is it reviewed?

Mr SHAW — I mentioned the SSSC course, which is a safety and sea survival course. That is a course that is offered by a handful of people. It is an internationally recognised course, so if you do it here, you can sail anywhere around the world and say, 'I have got this certification'. It is like the coxswain's certificate. It is different, but it is similar; there is a slightly different focus.

It is offered here in Victoria by a couple of independent providers and the ocean racing club does it. As I said, the ocean racing club runs it three or four times a year and I think the other providers do it on an as-needed basis. It is all examined and very formal. It is something like a two-day course; it is not a trivial course. It gives people a general introduction to various aspects of seamanship and coping with emergencies, and all that sort of thing. Does that answer your question?

Mr EIDEH — How often has it been reviewed?

Mr SHAW — How often is it reviewed? Do you mean the content?

Mr EIDEH — Yes.

Mr SHAW — As I said, it is an internationally recognised course, so it does not go through big changes, but it incorporates changes in technology as I have outlined. It is continuously being upgraded, but there is a core framework that really does not change because it does not need to change.

Mr RONALDS — In your opinion, it is good — is that the point?

Mr SHAW — Absolutely! I think we should encourage more people to do those sorts of courses.

The CHAIR — I thank you, on behalf of the committee, for being here today, giving us your valuable time and also educating us considerably about your industry and what goes on, the pitfalls and also the things that you have suggested could be improved.

You will receive a transcript of today's proceedings over the next couple of weeks. If you could just look at that and let us know if you think there any mistakes in the transcript, but do not make any changes to the substance of the document. It will be a public document, so if you have any questions, let us know. Otherwise, thank you very much for your time and we will be in touch with you in the next couple of weeks.

Witnesses withdrew.