

Inquiry into the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Tourism and Events Sectors

Mr John Young

Organisation Name:
Your position or role:

YOUR SUBMISSION

Submission:

Submission on behalf of Port Fairy Folk Festival Committee Inc.

The Port Fairy Folk Festival commenced in 1977. Initiated and run by the Geelong Folk Music Club until the late 1980's, it was handed over to the Port Fairy Community initially through the Borough of Port Fairy. In 1994, the Borough Council established the Port Fairy Folk Festival Committee Inc., as the governing body which has continued to this day. For 44 consecutive years the festival ran successfully, the last time in 2020 only days before the first lockdown under the Covid-19 Pandemic was introduced.

After long and agonising consideration, in August 2020, the 45th Festival scheduled to be held in March 2021 was postponed until 2022.

Since its establishment, the Port Fairy Folk Festival has acquired Iconic status throughout Australia and the World evidenced by its three times winner of the best Festival at the Australian Tourism awards thus gaining Hall of Fame Status, Victorian Premier's Award for Best Volunteer Organisation in 2016 and ranked in the top 100 Festival world-wide by Conder-Naste Traveller in 2019.

The Port Fairy Folk Festival Committee Inc. is a volunteer committee of local residents of business and corporate backgrounds, all who have a passion for the Festival and community of Port Fairy and District. Supporting this committee is a large assembly of volunteers and community groups who assist in the planning and operation of the Festival. As a not for Profit organisation, all profits are returned to the community through a series of grants and direct bequests. Since 1994, some 20 million dollars has been invested in a range of community programs and developments from Festival proceeds.

The Festival operates on Southcombe Park where 7 music venues are erected along with various other structures for food and craft stalls, small workshop venues and other such activities. 180 or so artists and performers entertain up to 11,000 patrons over the March Long Weekend from Friday evening to Monday afternoon. An associated "Village Program" of mostly free events is programmed in the township venues to add colour and music to the village for day trippers and townspeople not able to attend the main Festival arena.

Economic Impact Surveys over three year periods during the last five years estimates the economic value of the Festival to the Port Fairy Economy at around \$10 million per year.

Impacts of Covid-19 Pandemic:

Consequent to the postponement in 2021, The Festival has lost revenue of some three million dollars in lost ticket sales, essentially its annual income. Annual fixed costs such as wages and salaries and organisational over-heads of some \$300,000 have had to be born by existing financial reserves. Importantly, Job-Keeper was an important support to maintaining our specialist staff.

During the year, the Festival was able to undertake three small events, partnering with two organisations, Geelong Arts Centre in September and with Scottish musicians to stream "Postcard From Scotland" in November 2020. On the March Long weekend this year, the Festival ran a 4 part concert series to small socially-distanced audiences in the Reardon Theatre Port Fairy. Whilst small in scale, each event was well received and patronised and thus enabled the Festival to keep its profile alive amongst the community and festival world. These events did receive some small financial support from various grant process.

At a local economic impact level, the loss of visitation of some 15000 people including performers, production crews food and craft stall holders over the long weekend amounts to significant loss of usual

income for accommodation food and hospitality providers in the township.

What is required:

Information and support are major matters for attention to assist Festivals and events to survive and hopefully get back onto normal operations.

A communication system to and within this industry to assist organisations in managing through and out of the pandemic is essential. It is very stressful to have to plan(as we have and are developing) for 2022 not knowing what might eventuate. A month ago, the government expectation of a smooth rollout of the vaccine program gave confidence to this festivals and events industry that a fully vaccinated community would be fulfilled by year's end. Having opened ticket sales for March 2022 last month, we have sold significant numbers of tickets. We have already negotiated with artists to perform in March next year; we are discussing with all providers of venues, stallholders, production companies and the like to provide their services next March at Port Fairy. Whilst nothing is certain, we need to have some insight about the future of restrictions on operations of Festivals such as ours as we move towards March 2022. Is it likely that the vaccination rollout will be efficient enough to complete the task by year's end???

What will be the likely rules around Festivals in the New year? Our Festival is based on an patron and economic model of 10,000 adult tickets sales. This is our usual supporter base. Any social distancing requirements and separation rules that may cause numbers toe be reduced, but occupying the same spatial areas is uneconomical and therefore unviable. We need some surety about such likely restrictions.

Support:

The industry needs a support and advice process to enable swift advice around changing situations whether positive or more restricting. This information needs to be available well in advance of what ever introduction time is set, Sadly, this is not often possible, but would be appreciated. Some advice as to Points of contact regarding Covid-19 issues would be very helpful. Too often the only avenue for this is the daily news system

Yours sincerely

John Young
President
Port Fairy Folk Festival Committee Inc.

FILE ATTACHMENTS

File1:

File2:

File3:

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Signature:
JOHN YOUNG