

TRANSCRIPT

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into local economic development initiatives in Victoria

Dandenong — 27 February 2013

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Witnesses

Mr P. Helmore, President (affirmed), and
Ms J. Brown, Executive Officer (affirmed), Greater Dandenong Chamber of Commerce.

The CHAIR — Welcome to the public hearings of the joint parliamentary Economic Development and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into local economic development initiatives in Victoria. The evidence you give today is protected by parliamentary privilege. Anything you say outside this hearing is not afforded the same sort of privilege. Please both state your name, position and whether you are appearing on behalf of an organisation or on your own behalf.

Mr HELMORE — I am Peter Maxwell Helmore. I am the President of the Greater Dandenong Chamber of Commerce.

Ms BROWN — My name is Jacque Brown, the Executive Officer of the Greater Dandenong Chamber of Commerce.

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

Mr HELMORE — We are.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. I invite you to make an oral presentation.

Mr HELMORE — Sure. The Chamber of Commerce has had a long association with local council, and even before my time. We have an association that stems back 65 years. We have always been well supported by local council particularly in this area, and the support we get from local council covers a number of areas, not the least being grants, expertise and marketing support. The Chamber of Commerce has local government people sitting on its various committees, so we are very supportive of this particular local council and the way it treats particularly the Greater Dandenong Chamber of Commerce.

I am not sure what else we need to say or cover, but the local council supports us in a range of activities through numbers of functions that we run. We currently run networking functions, for which we have sponsorship from local government. We also have community events which we do in joint consultation with local government. One of the major ones would be Carols by Candlelight, which we run in conjunction with the City of Greater Dandenong, and we have some joint funding for that. We also run a number of other activities in conjunction with the Greater Dandenong City Council.

We have found that the thing that works best for us is a close relationship with the economic development unit here in Dandenong.

The CHAIR — What sort of relationship is that, sorry?

Mr HELMORE — An ongoing relationship, and that stems from years and years ago. The President of the Greater Dandenong Chamber of Commerce usually does a two-year stint. This is the second year of my second stint; I was a president back in 1994. Many ask why did I have another crack at it, and quite frankly as of today it would have been a wise decision to let someone else do it. But we have had a long ongoing relationship with the economic development unit through its various managers, and they particularly attend our Dandenong executive committee, which meets 11 or 12 times a year. We have found that the information, advice and expertise we get from some of those meetings has allowed us to develop our programs further.

I am not sure whether you are aware of our Premier Regional Business Awards function — which we run — and the economic development unit area is a sponsor of that particular function. That function is held in March of each year, and during the course of the previous year the committee goes out and sees or seeks information from 15 manufacturing businesses within Dandenong. The culmination of those 15 businesses that are seen during the year and presented at five breakfasts during that year is a gala dinner. As I said, that is in March and the economic development unit is a sponsor of that particular program.

In 2008 or thereabouts we had our major 20-year function, which was held at the Crown Casino, where over 800 people from this local area attended the gala dinner.

The CHAIR — That is impressive.

Mr HELMORE — It was a huge effort by all who were involved, and our major sponsors worked tirelessly to make sure that we got the 800, because you do not go to the Crown Casino without having enough people to turn up to the event. That was a super culmination of businesses within this area. In about three or four weeks

time we have our next gala dinner, which we are working on right now. Again 15 businesses from the local area will be presented and seven awards will be given at that function. It is held in high regard in relation to the business areas here in Dandenong.

The other thing we get from Greater Dandenong City Council is an improvement in the brand of Dandenong and also marketing opportunities. This arrived at my office this week — that is, the current *Stakeholder* — which the economic development unit puts out. Clearly on the back page is the advert for our gala dinner. Within this brochure there are lots of opportunities for the council and the Greater Dandenong Chamber of Commerce to express what is going on, what is current and some feedback from current businesses.

The CHAIR — That is it?

Mr HELMORE — I think that is it.

The CHAIR — Well done, thank you Peter.

Mr FOLEY — Peter and Jacquie, this inquiry is all about the different forms of local government support, involvement, or sometimes lack of support, or sometimes hindrance of local economic development strategies that take place across Victoria — metro, regional and rural Victoria — and it is looking at where it works well, what can be done better and what are the barriers to doing it better. Particularly from the ‘what could be’ kind of aspect, from your experience and the Chamber’s point of view, what could be done better in the relationship between local government and economic development strategies in their area and region?

Mr HELMORE — From our perspective we do not get involved in having a think about those projects or the opportunities; the thing that limits us — and we are no different as a committee to any other thing that runs here in Dandenong — is that a lot of us are selling the same product. Fundamentally we are all selling the opportunity of businesses networking, and the economic development unit is partnering that. If I could be so bold, less of us would be best because that would make those who were available more sustainable. I suspect that that is not going to happen.

Mr FOLEY — I suspect we are not going to recommend less competition.

Mr HELMORE — The thing for the Chamber is not to worry too much about what we cannot control. It is rather about managing what we do well. We are in a constant review of what we do and how we do it. We have found that when we run activities they now need to be the best you can get — perhaps the best speaker you can get. We could get an invite to a breakfast lunch or dinner to go and hear some magnificent people at any time of the day or night, so the key for us here in Dandenong is about networking, and that is really business to business. Having economic development unit people turn up at our networking functions works best because that gives our members the opportunity to have a talk with local government. That is what I think works best. I really do not have a thing that says ‘This is working poorly and needs to be improved’; it is all about the relationships that we have with our people that seems to work.

Mr FOLEY — In terms of Dandenong’s changing economic base, does the Chamber see a role for local government, state government and federal government coordination? How do you look to the market of what comes into Dandenong as customers? Are those the kinds of issues that the Chamber gets involved with?

Mr HELMORE — We have steered out of that space. One reason is that the Chamber of Commerce is pretty much a voluntary organisation; we do not have the resources to put together some strategic thinking. We do not have the resources to go to bat for some people who feel like things ought to change.

The brand of Dandenong is changing. When I was the President many years ago I was talking about the things that were going to happen. Ten years ago we were talking about being able to be in this facility, because 10 years ago it was still run down. Maybe five or six years ago I was talking about the clock tower that was supposed to add a special feature.

The Dandenong brand has changed, and it will continue to change. Walking the streets today there are probably shops that you would think in 5 or 10 years’ time will not be there because the demographics are going to change. The amount of people coming into 3175 will change. Places will be open more at night time, which

means it will be safer to be around; some of those things will change. We see that as a positive; we see that also as still a 10-year kind of project. It is still being evolved.

Mrs PEULICH — You referred to committees being set up. Could you list some of those so we understand the functions they serve?

Mr HELMORE — In terms of the Chamber?

Mrs PEULICH — Yes.

Mr HELMORE — We have an executive committee, which has about a dozen people sitting on it. That has a representation of sponsors and similar. We have a carols committee, which last year I chaired. That is really a joint function between the Chamber of Commerce and Greater Dandenong City Council to produce a community event. We have a marketing committee, which is established really now to look at the way we market our business and the way we use our database. We have a finance committee, which looks at our governance, and our treasurer — who is a CPA — makes sure that all our governance issues are taken care of. I think that is it.

Mrs PEULICH — In terms of the key issues you still have in Dandenong, is antisocial behaviour and crime still an issue, are we seeing some improvements, what further measures could be taken and are there any other issues you would like to flag?

Mr HELMORE — I am in a labour hire company so I see people all day, every day, and it is concerning to see some of the people who are walking through the area. That is just the way it is. From the Chamber's point of view I guess we do not delve that far. When we have our meeting at the economic development unit office it is a long way from Lonsdale Street at 10 o'clock at night. The Dandenong Retail Traders Association might have a different view, because their people are, if you like, at the coalface day in, day out.

I sit on the Dandenong Retail Traders Association committee as a de facto, so I get across both of those committees as well and have done for many years, and I guess there is a joint cooperation even within the committee structure. Between the Dandenong Chamber of Commerce, the Dandenong Retail Traders Association, the South East Business Networks, the South East Melbourne Manufacturers Alliance and even Women in Business — which is kind of the broad umbrella of all the networking things that are happening — I think in a combined effort we are actually trying to pick our mark. We are also trying to pick the dates where things are not being run so we can swap them around so that we are not all doing something in February, for example. We try to use our resources a little bit better.

Mrs PEULICH — Do you meet on a regular basis? Is there a title for that particular cluster, and does council sit in on that? For example, Casey City Council does something similar; they call it their economic forum, and they meet — I am not sure whether it is once a month or once every two months. All the chambers of commerce and traders associations sit around the table and they work through the various issues on the agenda with the council officers. That dovetails into their strategic plan. It seems like a reasonably good method of capturing issues.

Mr HELMORE — Yes, it seem like it is. We do not do it here. We certainly do for the DRTA and the Chamber of Commerce but not so much with the others, although we have a really open dialogue with those organisations. We have access to their calendars and all those kinds of things, but we do not meet as a group to try to work out the issues.

Mrs PEULICH — For example, signage, traffic, marketing would all be issues that all of you would collectively — —

Mr HELMORE — I have to say that funnels directly through DRTA. A lot of our guys are manufacturers or commercial people — real estate, accountants, banks, all those kinds of things.

Mr CARROLL — Just with your database, do you manipulate that; do you use that strategically to help your membership? For example, we visited Ductmakers this morning and I have just come from Compleat Angler, and they both raised how important their databases are — Compleat Angler has a membership database

of something like 27 000. They both talked about how they love to talk shop with their fellow businessmen and women.

You have quite a valuable database. Do members of your organisation have access to it?

Mr HELMORE — No.

Mr CARROLL — Do you look at the database and say, ‘Okay, we can probably see that some collaboration and some synergies would work if the manufacturers on our database came together versus perhaps some of the people in the IT sector getting together’? Do you look at that sort of stuff?

Mr HELMORE — We do not at the moment. We are still in the process of putting together the database from a number of sources, but for every organisation like Compleat Angler that database was instrumental in the owner getting it from when it had burnt out to up-and-running, so she is hugely passionate about that database and she uses that as a very pro-marketing kind of arrangement. For the Chamber of Commerce and for most associations the database is our lifeblood; that is what people pay to join, so we give it to no-one. But we also do not use it as a marketing tool, because we do not think that that is right. But we do use it in terms of trying to promote the opportunities for some of these people to come together and do their own networking and create an environment where they are quite comfortable to do that.

What we have found — this is my personal view — is that because we go to lots of opportunities where we are told we can network, it is a very forced, ‘Here is my business card. What do you do? I will swap it’ and ‘I do not need it.’ It is very contrived. So we have actively gone out to change that method for this year and create environments where it is more about the developing of the relationship first and finding out what they may or may not do and then perhaps asking for a card that may be appropriate, rather than force-feeding it the other way. We are actually early in that stage, because we have only had one event, but the feedback from that event was more positive than forcing people to go to a breakfast and then in between 7.15 and 7.30 am that is their networking, so everyone flies around and tries to dispense as many business cards as they can.

The CHAIR — Speed dating.

Mr HELMORE — And then they come back and say, ‘Well I don’t need that, don’t need that, don’t need that’. It is kind of wasted. I am quietly optimistic about this different method. And it is a bit of niche, because the Chamber does not have a set set of goals or key objectives or other criteria which we are going to be measured by. So it is not like some of the other associations, particularly if they are local government. They have a whole bunch of KPIs that they need to deliver. We can just kick back and say, ‘You know what? We are going to meet’ — which is what we did — ‘We will meet at the Ramada at 5 o’clock one Wednesday or Thursday night. We will just kick back, have a beer, we will see who does what’, and at the end of the day if you do not like it, you have lost nothing. This was a function that we thought would probably last three quarters of an hour, and I went there at 5.00 pm and we were still there at 6.30 pm. So I kind of think we are trying to take the pressure off business from a community point of view, because we are all driven and we all have things to do, trying to create a different space.

The CHAIR — Thank you. On behalf of the Committee I thank you very much for your attendance and also for the evidence that you have provided. You will be sent a transcript of today’s proceedings in probably around two weeks. Please feel free to make any alternations where you believe there has been a typographical or grammatical error, but nothing to the substance of the document. Thank you very much.

Mr HELMORE — Thank you.

Witness withdrew.