

ENVIRONMENT, NATURAL RESOURCES AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the management, governance and use of environmental water

Wycheproof — 12 October 2017

Members

Mr Josh Bull — Chair

Mr Simon Ramsay — Deputy Chair

Ms Bronwyn Halfpenny

Mr Luke O’Sullivan

Mr Tim Richardson

Mr Richard Riordan

Mr Daniel Young

Witnesses

Ms Tracy Pardella, President, and

Mr Ian Milburn, Committee Member, Wycheproof Vision

The CHAIR — Welcome to the Environment, Natural Resources and Regional Development Committee's public hearing in relation to the inquiry into the sustainability and operational challenges of Victoria's rural and regional councils. Can I once again extend a warm welcome to members of the public and members of the media, if present. The committee is hearing evidence today in relation to the inquiry into the sustainability and operational challenges of Victoria's rural and regional councils. Evidence is being recorded. All evidence taken today is protected by parliamentary privilege; therefore you are protected for what you say here today, but if you go outside and repeat those same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege.

Today's evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with proof versions of the transcripts at the earliest opportunity. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website. I will now invite you to proceed with a brief 5-minute opening statements, which will be followed by questions from committee members. Can I ask you to state your name and role for the record and then proceed with your opening statement.

Ms PARDELLA — I am Tracy Pardella, president of Wycheproof Vision, and with me is Ian Milburn, committee member of Wycheproof Vision.

A lot of our submissions are the same as Donald put in. Our biggest one is getting people from the city and rural areas to living here and giving them incentives to come here with their own education and putting in their own work to bring their own businesses or to come and start businesses here. There are not a lot of jobs. We need industry really badly. One thing I feel that Wycheproof needs, being the centre of Buloke, is industry. It has no industry whatsoever. It did in the past. It had industry that did not work because of bad management.

These days there is a lot more help with that type of thing and the management of business. I think that would be one really big thing for Buloke shire, to bring in industry, but again, as Donald said, we have to have the housing for that. The rules and regulations on the caravans of taking away people permanently living in caravans I think is absolutely ludicrous, because it is land that is sitting there unused that could very easily become very affordable housing for people. It is also a good environment to live in. People are meeting people and learning all the way. It could attract a lot more people to our town.

Again, our roads: I know you have taken away that 700 kilometres; that is a good thing. Our main roads are not so bad, but some of our arterial roads that go off into other towns in the shire are fairly rough. That is another thing I think our shire needs a bit of help with. We all know that all shires do not get enough money to run adequately, how they should. We just need to look at how we direct that money there. Another one that Donald mentioned was giving one year's rates as encouragement for people moving from the city into the country. That is basically all that we wanted to speak on. Thank you.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Tracy. I will take the opportunity to ask the first question, if I may. And Ian, thank you as well. Would you like to make a comment by way of an opening statement?

Mr MILBURN — Yes, I would like to just broaden it a bit further. I think over the years there has been a withdrawal of support by both state and federal governments towards local government. To give you just a minor example, I was part of the old Wycheproof shire leading up to the amalgamations. In the early 80s, as an example, Meals on Wheels were introduced with a subsidy. I believe it has only been increased twice since that time, and the burden has had to be picked up by local government. We just do not have the support. Technically in the Buloke shire I think something like 92 per cent of our rates would go on roads, and we have one of the largest road networks for a local government area in Australia, I believe, mainly because they were originally 640 and 320-acre blocks.

The state and federal government have not kept up the support. We heard from the Donald group particularly on rating, in terms of support for business, it is very difficult because there is no question that particularly broadacre farm areas throughout the state are declining and have been declining for a very, very long time, mainly to do with efficiency in agriculture. Regulation makes it extremely difficult. My background was farming, originally. I was actually a youth worker for 15 years, and then I started a business in 1989 out on the farm. We built a couple of boutique abattoirs and we were sending food all over Australia. The application of regulation makes it very, very difficult indeed. I had extensive dealings with PrimeSafe. I have to say their attitude is appalling.

The other thing that makes it very difficult indeed is WorkCover. I would emphasise very strongly indeed that I am a very strong supporter of the principles of WorkCover and the regulation. What I had enormous problems with was the application. The attitude seemed to be overall that all employers were exploitative bastards and all employees were very good, honest people. Life is not like that. We were employing up to 50 people at one stage, and the vast majority of my employees, if they went on WorkCover, it was genuine. But if you had someone determined to rot the system, as an employer I could do nothing about it. I really could not, because WorkCover would automatically take their position. That makes it very difficult indeed for business.

I had similar problems with PrimeSafe. I dealt with PrimeSafe and we dealt with quite a few government — we were even exporting at one stage. The application of those regulations, not the substance of them, the application of them, make running business very difficult. It was mentioned here earlier about a regulation of having to put in a disabled toilet for a hay shed. Now, please! Again, the principle is fine, but we need a much more common-sense approach to the application of these things. Getting business into areas like this of course is difficult. I have been involved in encouraging business and people participating for a very long time, but because of our declining population it is difficult. But certainly the burden of regulation and rates makes it extremely difficult for country business.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Ian, and thank you, Tracy. I see in my notes here that Wycheproof Vision meet once a month. Can I ask: has rate capping been discussed, and are either or both of you supportive of rate capping?

Ms PARDELLA — Yes, we are.

The CHAIR — As a way of a supplementary question, I see that your organisation has had some great involvement with the Wycheproof Youth Room, the Music on the Mount festival and a whole range of other community activities. Is that due to — in essence, have you picked up some of the slack? What concerned me in having a look at the submission from the council was a lack of funding for those youth services. Have people in the community had to pick up the slack as a result of some of these services being cut?

Ms PARDELLA — Yes, they have. There has not been much action happening in Wycheproof for quite a while because there just is the lack of community, of people, and manpower to get things going. Then the steps of going through all the paperwork once again to get grants to do anything is just beyond a lot of the people that live in the population. It just makes it very, very hard. The legislation — we come back to that again. You are running festivals in Melbourne or in your areas. They just seem to happen, and all the little things that we have to do up here in the country they do not have to do down there. They do not have to do them. So it makes it very hard to do anything like that — all the permits. Before you get through all the paperwork to run a festival or any type of event, you are up this high in paperwork and money before you even get anywhere to start.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Tracy.

Mr RAMSAY — I take note what you said about the need for jobs in these more remote areas. Decentralisation policy, which Luke talked about and we have heard before, is a long-term plan. It is not new. It has been tried over many, many years by a whole lot of different ministers for decentralisation that unfortunately has not had great success. So we hope it will have success in the future. But an immediate issue is how do we provide Buloke shire with some long-term viability, notwithstanding the fact that it has got a small population base and a large road asset. Do you think the shared resource model that councils are currently looking at would work for this particular region — that is, the administration costs and other costs associated with running a council could be shared amongst five or six, whereas then you would reduce the costs of running an administrative arm of the works of a council?

Mr MILBURN — Can you give us give us an example of what you mean by ‘shared’; what sort of things?

Mr RAMSAY — About some of the regulation you talk about — so instead of having six different environmental offices and six different councils, you would have one. Instead of having seven staff dealing with a planning issue in one council and seven in another, you would actually amalgamate that workforce to deal with a plethora of planning issues that actually have some commonality amongst the councils — that sort of thing. So sharing equipment, even on a lease arrangement — I understand that some of these rural councils are looking at the way they can share some of the tasks that have some commonality between them, particularly in administration where it costs about 60 or 70 per cent of the costs of running a council. You quoted, I think, 70 or

80 for road infrastructure as the largest expense of council, but certainly for many councils we have spoken to it has been admin. So they are looking at how to share that cost amongst a group of councils.

Mr MILBURN — Look, fine; on principle I would not have a problem with that, and it is a lot of common sense. But I still come back to the point that you need to look at the regulation, how it impacts on small communities and how it impacts on business and the impracticality of so much of it. The principle of sharing is good, and in effect that is what amalgamation of the shires has done, but it does not start to answer some of the real problems of trying to run a business — well, probably business in general — in areas like this.

Ms PARDELLA — But the sharing of equipment and things I think would be a really good idea, because if you look at some of the equipment, you are looking at thousands and thousands — multiple thousands — of dollars for certain things like our streetsweeper, for instance. Just guessing, it will probably sit idle more than it is moving. I think it roughly cost about \$65 000 when it was bought, and to me that could be doing a lot more work than it is. I run a business here in the town. If I employ a girl, I do not expect her to sit around or stand around for 30 per cent of the time she is at work for the day. I need her to be working all the time apart from her breaks.

Also in small places like this you have got the Donald depot, where a grader or something might live, and it comes across to Wycheproof and does a job. The guy lives in Wycheproof, but he has to take that grader back to Donald and house it, whereas we have good housing here for it, and then he has got to drive back again, all in his work time. So that to me is just an absolute waste of time. Then the next day that grader might need to be down on the Charlton Road. So he has got to go back to Donald, get that and go there. It is just backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards, playing cross-ball with big expensive equipment. So I think on the sharing part of it, looking at some of those things and the jobs obviously as well, you could ring one shire and ask for something, but then they have got to ring somebody else, and then they have to ring somebody else and then they have got to ring somebody else. So if you only had one person who was in charge of all that area, you would only be ringing one person.

Mr RAMSAY — In relation to transport, one of the challenges for moving population out of Melbourne, particularly into regional areas, is transport. What is your view of the current status of public and private transport here, and where do you see improvements could be made to encourage population shift?

Ms PARDELLA — I am probably not the best to talk on that, because I think Wycheproof is fairly lucky and has good public transport. We have a bus every day that goes from here to Bendigo, and then you can catch a train to Melbourne. That happens every day except Christmas Day. We also have one that goes to Swan Hill once a week — so if people have got eye appointments or things like that. So I am quite happy with it. I am probably not the one to talk to about that because — I mean, I drive a car, but I do use public transport a lot, and I think we are fairly lucky where we are.

Mr MILBURN — I would agree with Tracy. I think we are pretty fortunate for a small country town.

Ms PARDELLA — That is not really a problem that we have.

Mr RAMSAY — I do not hear that very often.

Mr MILBURN — I do not use public transport, but we really do have quite good services, to be honest.

The CHAIR — We are very happy with that one.

Mr MILBURN — But on the other hand there has been an enormous withdrawal of services from the bush over a very long period of time by all governments and by all persuasions of government.

Mr YOUNG — Thanks very much for coming in and providing us with your time today. I just wanted to go back to a little bit of the conversation before where we were talking about rate capping. The Chair asked the question of whether you support rate capping, and you do. There is obviously some benefit to that, with very high rates, and we need to sort of start pulling it up a bit. But then the conversation sort of evolved into services that have been cut and a lack of services in regional areas. It is really easy to play the blame game with councils — and believe me, for the most part I hate councils. I cannot stand some of the things they do, and I have a lot of gripes with my own. But it is very easy to play the blame game when they are having their income taken away on one hand, not being supplemented and having to cut services because of that, and everyone hates them. So at the same time as the government is regulating to take away their income in one way, they probably

should be picking up the slack instead of you guys and supplementing that in some way. But instead we have had this government take away other funding from councils like roads and bridges funding, which is worth a million bucks to every council up here. How do you sort of put those two elements together — that we like rate capping because it stops us paying for it and stops us paying exorbitant rates, but we also need the council to have enough money to run the services that we want.

Mr MILBURN — Surely something like rate capping is purely a temporary solution — not even a solution — because inevitably governments will introduce it for a period of time, and then off it goes again. Surely the underlying problem is not rate capping; it is the amount that we have to pay for not just rates but services and everything like that in the bush. Surely that is the thing that governments need to look at in terms of providing it here, because what does a rate cap do? It saves you a bit of money for how long?

Mr YOUNG — Until the council cannot afford it.

Mr MILBURN — Yes, that is right. To me that is a short-term political solution. So inevitably the rates will go up again after that, and then they will probably have to be increased too much to try and cover off the shortfalls that have been made in the past. What we really need to look at is: what is it that is causing the cost that we are faced with and how much out of balance are we in terms of what is in urban areas and the treatment of rural areas compared to urban? That to me is the central issue.

Mr YOUNG — You are right that it is a political solution, and a very short-term one. No-one hates having their rates reduced from the increases that were going to happen; no-one says no —

Ms PARDELLA — No.

Mr MILBURN — It is supplementary. The Donald group highlighted here the difference in terms of X value what we pay for rates and what you would in an urban centre.

Mr O'SULLIVAN — Thanks very much for coming in today. I take it you are both from Wycheproof, so I want to ask you a Wycheproof-specific question following on from my earlier comments about the bakery in Wycheproof. I am certainly keen to pursue things to get more people out into the country, get more businesses out into the country, particularly into towns like Wycheproof. Can you tell us the story of the Wycheproof bakery, which has only opened up fairly recently and has got quite a good reputation as being very, very good? Can you tell us that story in terms of how that was started and why that has been so successful?

Ms PARDELLA — I think bakeries are fashionable at the moment. They are a very fashionable thing and the location is fantastic where they are. Four couples went in and they spent a significant amount of time — two years ago, maybe — setting up, so they did everything right in that way to make sure that once the doors were open their business was going to be successful. Of course, as you said, they are employing a lot of employees as well there. And social media — they are on that all the time, and that is a big thing that businesses have got to use these days as well in that way. Yes, it is taking off. Being on the Calder Highway and having the Tyrrell lake thing happening up Sea Lake way has been really good for Wycheproof, Charlton — all our towns along there as well. So you have got more cars on the road — tourists — heading that way that normally would not be.

Mr MILBURN — It is a credit to the people who set that up. It has been excellent. To take it a bit further, we are very keen obviously to promote this community, and the estimate, as we understand, is there could be anything up to 200 000-odd Chinese tourists visiting Lake Tyrrell in the next two or three years. That is, I gather, on official government figures. Obviously the bakery is an attraction. Again we would like to promote this as part of that. We had the smallest registered mountain in the world, and it is actually quite unique on a number of things. We looked into the possibility of correcting some nice big signs in the communities just saying that, and we were told by the shire that VicRoads would not allow it. We were hoping for maybe a 3-metre-square sign saying, 'Smallest mountain in the world — lookout' and so on. That brings me back to the regulations and how far we can go and how much we are restricted in trying to promote our own community. It is just small things like that, but it is ongoing all the time. But the bakery is excellent.

The CHAIR — I think we know where we are going for lunch. Thank you both for being here and giving your thoughts to the committee. We greatly appreciate it. Thank you for your time.

Witnesses withdrew.