

ENVIRONMENT, NATURAL RESOURCES AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the sustainability and operational challenges of Victoria's rural and regional councils

Wycheproof — 12 October 2017

Members

Mr Josh Bull — Chair

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Witness

Mr Garry Summerhayes, Chairman, Berriwillock Community Development Group.

The CHAIR — Good morning and welcome to the Environment, Natural Resources and Regional Development Committee public hearing in relation to the inquiry into the sustainability and operational challenges of Victoria's rural and regional councils. I extend a welcome to members of the public and media, if present, and I also extend a warm welcome to members, I believe, of grade 5 and 6 — there they are — at Wycheproof P-12. Thank you for being here. We hope that you find this hearing informative and engaging, and hopefully you can all learn something. I can see that everyone is incredibly well tuned in and ready to go.

The committee today is hearing evidence in relation to the inquiry into the sustainability and operational challenges of Victoria's rural and regional councils, and 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 such privilege. You will be provided with proof versions of the transcript at the earliest opportunity. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website. I will shortly invite you to make an opening statement, which will be followed by questions from committee members. I ask that you state your name and job title for the record.

Mr SUMMERHAYES — Garry Summerhayes, a landowner and grain grower at Berriwillock and chairman of the Berriwillock Community Development Group and a few other community groups.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Garry. Over to you to make a short statement.

Mr SUMMERHAYES — I am not prim and polished like some of the other presenters. I am from a very small rural community, probably of about 100 people. A lot of volunteers make a lot of things work in our community. Being a grain-growing community, we are a declining community, probably of 100 people, with larger machinery and larger farms — and I am guilty of it. Originally there was probably a farm and a family on every square mile, but now we are farming several square miles of land and there are not many farmers and not much population required with the large machinery. So we are a little bit different to the presenters you have had. Our community is slowly dwindling away, and that is just a reality. We are not going to fix that today. That is just what we live in.

We are very close to Sea Lake and we travel to Swan Hill a fair bit. I do support what Donald and Wycheproof and the larger towns have been saying about how we have got to make their communities work. We are near Sea Lake. There is quite a bit of a Chinese tourist theme running up there, which I think will dribble down right through the shire, like accommodation here and other places, or the bakery and other places will probably benefit from that.

But in relation to local issues or concerns we have got, roadside vegetation is a major issue to us landowners and to anybody that wants to live in those areas with the fire hazard. Technically, as far as I know, we are only allowed to control 300 millimetres of roadside vegetation through our fence, which means we cannot control fire hazards, we cannot control noxious weeds. We are forced to rely on the shire to do it, and they have not got the resources and they have not got the finances to do it. I think the government need to be mindful that in a season like we are having, and last year, we need to probably double their allocation — they might say more — because these control methods are going to have to be done twice.

If you get a normal dry spring in the Mallee when the roadsides do not grow much, it is pretty easy and economical to control. But in a year like this we would have wild oats and weeds 2 metres high. They are tapping on the mirrors on utes on side roads, and there is no control. They have not got the finances to do it, and we are prohibited from doing it. It does not stop some landowners from doing it, and where the landowners have stepped out and put some chemical down and done a bit of slashing, it is quite safe. But where it has been left — I do not blame the councils if they have not got the funds to do it. I mean, we can stand here and try and hang the council, but that will not achieve anything. They need some support in these types of seasons — we want these seasons to continue because they are very profitable for us — or relax some regulations and let us spray some roadsides. I know it is an environmental issue, but noxious weeds are not getting controlled and there is an enormous fire hazard there. I was at a CFA group meeting last night and their number one concern is roadsides and we cannot do much about it. So that is one point and problem.

Where I live — we talk about technology — we have basically got very little phone service and very little email service, so that is something that does need addressing. It is a major problem to do business. Banks seem to require more data to get through their security and quite often I cannot bank quite often during the day or

evenings when the schoolkids get home and get on their iPhones and other things. You can get up at 6 o'clock in the morning and do it, but we should have a little bit better service in that area.

Roads — you have been hearing that story all day — are just a major concern, and as grain growers we are demolishing the roads with our trucks, and that is going to continue, we hope. We do not want the trucks to stop because that means we have got no income. Roads, even major roads like the Calder Highway, need more money spent on them. The arterial roads that feed into our grain receivals are broken up. Not all, but they just need money to repair them, and the floods are the same. We have got creek crossings which were washed out in floods last year that still have not been sealed at the moment. I am assuring the shire are waiting on funding to do that work, but the shire cannot be asked to carry the cost of repairing those sorts of crossings when it is a Mother Nature sort of activity that has caused it. I do not believe they should.

We are a bit lucky. Probably some of you know Darren Weir. Darren Weir comes from Berriwillock so we are riding on his back a little bit at the moment, which is wonderful for us. You go in the hotel and there are murals and paintings all around of Darren. Darren used to call. His father is now deceased but his brother lives in Berriwillock and I went to school with his sister. But regulations, that is what is annoying. We are trying to put a sign up to recognise that on the highway. We are just bogged down with complications at the moment. You are only allowed six words, they cannot have italics, you have got to have them straight and all in upper or lowercase.

Mr O'SULLIVAN — So you have to do it. Ride along on a bike with spray paint to recognise him?

Mr SUMMERHAYES — Well, Berriwillock in their wisdom put up some sheets over the 'Welcome to Berriwillock' signs when he won the cup, and they were up there for quite a while. We are trying to steer towards a little bit towards a bit of silo artwork too. I do not know if the shire have got a shire employee looking into that. If that happens, that could be good. Or we can go out in a paddock and put a sign up, but that is another issue. Regulations are bogging us down a bit, and I think unfortunately we tend to be a 'want to do ourselves' community. If we see a job, we want to go and do it, and that is how volunteerism works in our little towns anyway. We would not survive without volunteerism. I could call a working bee tomorrow, and I would get eight or 10 young workers that will turn up and work, and bring some of their own equipment. It may not fit into all the regulations, but we will get the job done.

We are extremely lucky at Berriwillock. We have attracted a grant for about \$1.9 million and built a new community multipurpose centre about three years ago, including the CFA. There is a new bowling green. We have just been successful in getting funding for that, so that will be finished at the end of January, February. It is to replace four old buildings — a public hall, an infant welfare centre, a bowling green and the CFA. People are returning to the area. We are a bit doom and gloom on population. They are not returning to Berriwillock. We are getting people coming in to live in cheap houses, but these people come to Wycheproof that have gone away to uni or somewhere and worked, and then decided they like the country life and have returned here. We need to try and encourage that somehow. We are not going to encourage people to Berriwillock. I am not being really negative, but we have got a problem with little population. We have got a post office open half a day and a fantastic hotel. That is all we have got in our little village at the moment. We have had a bakery, we have had everything, but the population are not there to service. A lot of the women in the town travel to Sea Lake and work in Sea Lake. They will do their bit of shopping up there, so we just need to make those communities work.

The population of our town is changing because of the people that are coming that are chasing cheaper low-priced houses. They are not interested in communities or volunteerism really, but that is just what we have got to live with. One of our good locals went and knocked on the door of a new person, and they said, 'We didn't come here to socialise. We don't want to mix. We just came here to live'. So that is what we have got to put up with, but, anyway, that is just what we have got.

Regulations — here is another one I just found out yesterday. One of the shire people may know about it, but there is a major problem in the Sea Lake hospital. They have just rebuilt three-quarters of the hospital — a complete new wing on the hospital — which will be a complete new hospital. My father, whose name is up on the board there, was a councillor, but that is quite irrelevant. We have been trying to get him into aged care for a few months. They said, 'No, we are not going to let any new people in until we get the new wing of the hospital open'. It is completed. It has had a lot of defects. They have fixed a fair few of them and now, on the last tick-off, they will not tick off the fire service because someone has made a mistake. It has got a diesel fire pump and it has got to be electric, which I cannot believe the possibility of it. I was talking to the regional officer of

the district CFA last night, and he said, as far as he knew — but he has not been involved for a while — they used to have to have an electric charge pump to keep the line charged, to keep your sprinklers and things all charged. As soon as there was a drop in pressure, it would turn the diesel pump on.

So it has got to go back to tender. It will be months before they can occupy it, so they have now decided to let a few more patients in. I think dad is going in next week. They have converted the aged-care hostel into a hospital at the moment. There is red tape. I do not know who has made the mistake. I am not involved in it. I just know what has happened. We cannot get someone into the hospital, and now they have realised that they have got a few more months before they can use this new wonderful hospital because of red tape. That probably should not really be my closing comment.

Rubbish bins is another issue, and that is only trivial. But the shire run what I think is a self-funding system, which is quite all right. I have got a house in Bendigo and it is cheaper to get rubbish collected there, but we cannot get a rubbish collection on a road. We live out of town. This is trivial, but what is echoing through the whole community is that we should all be treated same, and so we need some more funding possibly for that, but that is a bit irrelevant. I think the message to Melbourne or to the Parliament is that you cannot expect to treat everyone in the state the same or you will have nobody living in the country. You will have no grain to get your bread. I do not know how you handle it, but it is an issue. We are not going to collect the same rate revenue here, or if we try to, as to what Knox city or someone collect, because I know Graeme Emerson who was there. He grew up in Berriwillock too. But we cannot collect the same rate revenue. We just need to have a rethink on how we can fund — I do not know how you do it — small shires. I do not think making them bigger is going to solve the problem. It is only going to stretch it out further, and we need some local input. You have got to be born and bred nearly to live in these communities, really, to work the nuts and bolts out of how people think and what we need, but we just do not want to get too big. Big is not always the best, but I do not know how you fund it. Thank you.

The CHAIR — Thanks, Garry. Thanks for that opening statement and those reflections. I just want to pick up on your point in relation to bins. You said they were trivial. I have a view that they are an important local community service. I certainly know that the people in the Hume municipality, where I live, consider them a very important local service. Can you explain to me how, when you say you are out of town, you miss out and those in town get them picked up and how is that delineation made by the municipality?

Mr SUMMERHAYES — I think the rubbish contractor will pick up a bin on his trip from town to town if you are on that particular road and probably will not charge the shire, because there is no extra travel involved. But we are paying the same charge for our rubbish bin, and I live 2 kilometres or 2½ kilometres north of the town. There is no pick-up service on that road, so we actually pick our bins up and cart them to town to deliver them. We have had a wheelie bin or two fall off a ute in the time and we have even had to have a repair job on a wheelie bin. Well, the town people would not have that. So that is what we have got to do to deliver them. It was our choice; it is not compulsory to pay the garbage levy to have a rubbish bin. That was my choice. This might seem strange, and it may not fit into the guidelines, but my first real reason for getting a rubbish bin was radish, which is a weed that grows in the crop. My farm is basically fairly free of radish, but if you find five plants, you have got to dispose of the seeds somewhere. We dig them out by hand, and the best way I found of doing it was putting them into a wheelie bin and they left the farm. But that may not be what should be going into my wheelie bin.

The CHAIR — Just as a way of a supplementary: this committee has the somewhat challenging task of looking at some of those operational challenges that you have just articulated. Is there one stand-out, core recommendation, if you like, that you could make to the committee? You spoke extensively about population. You spoke about new people coming to the area and sometimes the difficulties in making them feel part of the community. You touched on population in parts. Is there a recommendation that you could put forward? I believe you said that making municipalities bigger might solve the problem. You mentioned red tape and a whole range of other things. Is there one thing that stands out for you that the committee could put forward in its report that you think would make a genuine difference to many of the issues that you have identified?

Mr SUMMERHAYES — The major problem I feel and a few of us feel is that we need to be recognised as people, and you cannot treat us the same as people in Melbourne, where you have got the massive rate income. We need to be looked after. No, that is not the right word. We need to be respected for where we live. I think we are going to have to —

The CHAIR — Understood?

Mr SUMMERHAYES — Understood, yes. I do not want to go and live in Melbourne either, but I am just saying that it needs to be understood that in relation to where we live we need some assistance somehow — government assistance. It does not matter whether you look at churches or anything else. I could start on the church, too. There is another issue there, just socially. We need the majority of the services that the people in Melbourne or large regional centres need, because people want rubbish bins, people are compelled to have sewerage systems. We are compelled to do lots of things. I think we just need to be recognised.

I do not know what the solution is, but I am just pleased that you people have come up here to perhaps understand a little bit. I am talking from a small community. If I go to Wycheproof or Sea Lake, we want some other services. I am trying to just explain where we live.

The CHAIR — It is very beneficial and very important work.

Mr RAMSAY — Thank you, Garry. My introduction to Berriwillock was through Garry Bibby. We did a farm tour in his V8 Ford Falcon, and I think we were doing it at about 180 kilometres an hour through the entire area. We did the whole 7000 acres in about 3 minutes.

Mr SUMMERHAYES — That would be right.

Mr RAMSAY — It was a magic tour.

Mr SUMMERHAYES — Yes, I know Garry very well. He is a neighbour.

Mr RAMSAY — I think he is actually enjoying the time down by the seaside.

Mr SUMMERHAYES — Yes, he loves it down there, fishing.

Mr RAMSAY — Anyway, I am digressing. The issues that you have raised for me are around the red-tape regulation, and you talked a bit about native vegetation issues and roadside management, which I am familiar with from my old roles with the VFF, and planning. One of the recommendations may well be that we look at ways we can reduce some of that red-tape regulation to encourage more business out into regional areas. I am just wondering whether you maybe see a specific committee dealing with some of the issues around red tape and regulation specific to small rural councils to aid and help, particularly in planning. In the previous government we actually had flying squads, which proved popular with local councils because they actually dealt with some of the more intricate matters of planning that local councils had trouble finding the expertise in. Could you make a comment about that?

Mr SUMMERHAYES — Yes, and sometimes we get too bogged down with too many committees. We actually need to do something. If a recommendation comes out of a committee, it does not go somewhere sometimes; it gets bogged.

Mr RAMSAY — Not local committees. I am talking about like the red tape commissioner we have for business to be able to go to and say, ‘Sort this out’.

Mr SUMMERHAYES — Yes, we can try. The problem is — I better be careful — we can get too green orientated. I think that is the reason why we are not allowed to do anything on the roadsides, because we might damage the exotic lizard that lives in the grass. But the practicality is the fire hazard. No-one can convince me about weeds growing that wide on the road. One of my neighbours this year does not want his ute radiator blocked up, so he has actually sprayed the bit of grass between the two wheel tracks up a little track. I am not answering your question. I do not know what the answer is, if that makes sense.

Mr RAMSAY — I would like to get something on the record. You have raised the issue around regulation and red tape, yet you have not really defined what you think we could do as a committee to make —

Mr SUMMERHAYES — Well, I think you need to relax some of them. That is what I am asking, I suppose. This roadside vegetation one has only come along in the last two or three years probably. I think there is someone here in this area, and Wycheproof has been challenged and there might have been an attempt to try to penalise it for it. But up at home I do not think there are any penalties at the moment. We need to revisit that

one and look at it, because we can voluntarily do the work. We are not asking for remuneration, we are just asking to be able to do the work. That still has not answered your question.

Mr O'SULLIVAN — I have not got a question either, other than to say, Garry, I believe everything you said is absolutely true in terms of the things that need to be addressed.

Mr SUMMERHAYES — But I cannot answer how to do it.

Mr O'SULLIVAN — We will keep chipping away at it.

The CHAIR — Garry, thank you for your time and for presenting to the committee this morning. I think you have raised some outstanding points, and the committee will take those forward as we go forward in our deliberations.

Mr SUMMERHAYES — Thank you for the invitation.

Witness withdrew.