

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

Mr Simon Ramsay — Deputy Chair

Ms Bronwyn Halfpenny

Mr Luke O'Sullivan

Mr Tim Richardson

Mr Richard Riordan

Mr Daniel Young

Witnesses

Mr Graeme Milne, President,

Mr Jim Petrie, Vice-President,

Mr Ian Roberts, Member, Watchem Progress Association; and

Mr Justin Di Caprio, President, Watchem Men's Shed, and Committee Member, Watchem Progress Association.

**Necessary corrections to be notified to
executive officer of committee**

The CHAIR — Good morning, and welcome to the Environment, Natural Resources and Regional Development Committee's hearing into the sustainability and operational challenges of Victoria's rural and regional councils. I extend a warm welcome to members of the public and members of the media, if present. All evidence is being recorded. All evidence taken today is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected for what you say here today. However, if you go outside and repeat the same comments, those matters may not be protected by such privilege. Today's evidence is being recorded, and 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 now invite you to proceed with a brief, 5-minute opening statement, which will be followed by questions from committee members. What we might do is go down the line. I will ask you to state your name and title for the record, and then I will have a member of the committee make the opening statement.

Mr ROBERTS — My name is Ian Roberts. I am a business owner in Watchem.

Mr Di CAPRIO — I am Justin Di Caprio. I have an online aquarium. I am also president of the men's shed and a member of the progress association, and I also facilitate and manage the community hub.

Cr MILNE — Graeme Milne, councillor for Buloke shire, president of the Watchem Progress Association and business owner in Watchem.

Mr PETRIE — Jim Petrie. I am retired nowadays, and I am vice-president of the Watchem Progress Association. I have been in Watchem for 13 years.

The CHAIR — I will hand over to you for an opening statement.

Cr MILNE — Thanks for the opportunity to come along today and have a say on things that affect our sustainability in the bush. The boys here will all have a bit to say on a couple of things when you give them the opportunity. Our major concern, I suppose, is fairly similar to everybody else's in small rural towns and hamlets as well as our larger towns and our shire as a whole. Remoteness seems to be an issue that affects us all out here, where we do not have the equality in services that are afforded larger populations. We understand that is all done by cost and people, but the concerns that we have are that one size does not fit all as far as funding arrangements and things go and that our ability to go into projects and things that improve our lifestyle are affected because of our financial position.

Often grants and things are one for one or one for three, and in small rural communities — as you said, the district population is about 114, I suppose, but the town population might be 70 — it can be hard to run a chook raffle. I think we are running chook raffles at the moment to try and raise money for a park fence, and it is going to take us something like four years to raise the money. So what we are saying is that small rural communities have the same range of issues as some of our larger communities in the shire. There is more chance of those larger communities actually being able to action something through financial availability, as opposed to the smaller ones.

We do not want to harp on about just the inability of things to happen in small towns. It is a lot about the people and the volunteering that has to be put onto those people to make up the shortfall. With volunteering, as we know, at this end of the world Buloke shire is one of the highest volunteering shires in the state. I think that is probably because of the fact that if we want something, we have to do it ourselves, get it ourselves or provide it. We hope to be able to give you a bit of an insight into three, four or a dozen things. Some of them have been touched on. You heard the last speaker, Garry, touch on a few of the things that we will back up. We are just grateful for the opportunity to be able to come along and put the side of the story that will not be unique by any stage. It will be something that you hear a fair bit of, but we will just reiterate the problems that we have in the bush.

The CHAIR — Thanks very much, Graeme. Are there any further comments, or are you happy to take questions? I will ask just one, conscious of giving all committee members a fair go this morning. Something that was put forward this morning when you may or may not have been here was around some different rules or a different way of operating for towns of 5000 people or less and more than 200 kilometres from Melbourne. I picked up on your point in relation to grants being for one for two or one for three. Would there be benefits in pursuing both those propositions, if you like, by way of saying that smaller communities in rural and regional

Victoria could go a one for seven or a one for eight, rather than a one for two or a one for three, where the local municipality with the community has to raise far more funds to be able to get that additional piece of infrastructure or grant or whatever it may be? Would there be benefits in going down that path?

Cr MILNE — I am happy to have a go at that, thank you. Josh, I think there certainly would be. Some communities are financial; others are not. As a shire, we often sit and look at the projects that we can apply for because we know we can round up funds for that but we cannot round up matching funds for some other things. So the communities are no different.

I suppose if in kind was not recognised in grants, we would have no hope. Certainly that is a big benefit. That allows for communities to actually have input into it and have some ownership of the job they are doing as well as achieving what they are after. Certainly a higher ratio of grant money would be something that would make smaller jobs more possible and assist local government and other organisations that are trying to fund some things in the bush, just to get them going.

Mr YOUNG — Gentlemen, you have touched on a few issues, and I recognise that many of the issues that you are talking about are issues that other people will bring up. We get told a lot of the problems all the time, and often we get told, ‘You need to go away and try to find a way to fix this’. So I am going to give you the opportunity now. What do you want us to go away and do now? What are the things that the government could do or even suggestions that could go to councils? What are the things that need to be fixed now?

Cr MILNE — I have got a comment, but I will let the other guys have a go.

Mr ROBERTS — I am a small business owner. I bought the hotel there in March this year. I have come down from Mount Isa, Queensland, and the things that I am running into are weeds, cactuses, bindies — things like that. For me to clear my block and everything like that is going to cost me a fortune, but it is all over town. The roads: coming in here today, on a 7-kilometre stretch of road there were 25 rough surface signs. It is not the council’s fault.

Mr YOUNG — Have they started putting the speed limits down in this area?

Mr ROBERTS — They are 40 kilometres an hour on an open road.

Mr YOUNG — That is all they do. They do not fix the roads; they just drop the speed limits — a pain.

Mr ROBERTS — Yes, they put a rough surface sign up and drop the speed limit, but the roads are in areas where there is water underneath the roads. So it is not actually the council’s fault that the roads are like that, but they need more funding.

Volunteers: in Watchem we do a lot of volunteer work, with working bees and things like that, wholly and solely to try and make the place beautiful so that people can stop. My business relies on people stopping, coming through and everything like that. You said that there are 140 people in Watchem. We are trying to get more people to move into the area, but how can we do that? We are trying to attract people to the area.

As I said, I have worked for a council up in Mount Isa. The state government and the federal government, they start these projects and everything like that. Then they hand them over to the councils and two years down the track the councils just cannot sustain some of these projects. Some of them go bye-bye. There has got to be more input by the state and federal governments into local government.

As I said, I am a small business owner. There are three businesses in Watchem: the post office-corner shop, the hotel and the online business — and the real estate agent, sorry. I forget him. We have got a lot of farms. They are all businesses themselves, but when you are looking at the farms, they are struggling but they do get a lot more assistance than what a local business in Watchem gets.

With transport, yes, we have got a bus that comes through at 1.30 in the morning, wakes everybody up as it pulls up, drops people off, picks them up, and off it goes. But if someone has got to go to the doctor, there is no transport, so again it relies on someone from the hub to take them to the doctor. We are trying to buy a bus and to put on a courtesy bus, which then we will be using for the community as well. But again it comes down to dollars.

Pest and animal control: you know that we have had mice in the farms, but hang on, the mice once they were in the farms came into the houses. The other day I had a four-and-a-half-foot brown snake in my laundry and my bathroom. This is what we have been coming up against since March.

The recycling: I have a pet hate of recycling for the simple fact that Mount Isa never, ever did it. Down here, yes, they do do it and they recycle, but it costs a fortune to take stuff to the tip. I think the last load I took to the tip, not just recycling but rubbish itself, was \$32 for a trailer load. I have the local bloke dropping pods off so that all the aluminium cans I can put into one, all the glass and plastic I put into the other and all the dog cans I put into the other one, wholly and solely to recycle.

As I said, I have a lot of time for councils. Gone are the days when council employees were the Joe Blows who could not get a job anywhere else. Councils now have to go up against public enterprise and do their work. They need professional staff. Councils are understaffed already. They cannot afford to put extra people on. Unless you go out west where I was, the wages are fairly basic, as far as I am concerned, for councils for the work that they do.

My pet hate is drinking water. I went to put post-mix on. Somebody comes in and orders a rum and Coke. They cannot because the water is not potable. I have no drinking water. However, the legislation says that I have to supply drinking water 15 degrees or less to people at the bar. I have to go down to the council trailer and fill up plastic bottles and come back so that I have drinking water in a hotel where the legislation says I have to have it.

Mr YOUNG — That is an interesting one.

Mr ROBERTS — Apart from that, it is a pretty good place, Watchem. You should stop in.

Mr YOUNG — Is there anyone else who has any immediate fixes that they can think of?

Mr Di CAPRIO — My biggest one is, because I run a community hub, we have probably 12 cancer patients in Watchem who have to go to treatments. We currently utilise the community car in Birchip, but a lot of times we have noticed it is double-booked or they cannot do surgery. One of the guys goes to Donald three days a week for dialysis. He has just lost his licence. The community car in Birchip cannot take that on because it is too much of a strain, that three days a week. So I would say more transport, even some form of funding for a community car or a community bus for each community.

Mr O'SULLIVAN — It is great to see you guys coming in here from a little place like Watchem. I know Watchem fairly well, and it is great to come in here and hear it from you guys, particularly for some of these members. Josh is from close to the city, and he is in government as well, so it is good for him to hear some of the struggles that small communities have. There is no simple solution to a lot of the problems that you have. We will keep chipping away to see if we can come up with things to try to make some of those issues better.

Ian, I just want to go back to the issue in relation to your drinking water. That is fairly unusual in Victoria that you have a town that does not have potable drinking water.

Mr Di CAPRIO — It is untreated water.

Mr O'SULLIVAN — What is the scenario there? Why have you not got potable water?

Mr PETRIE — It is not treated.

Mr ROBERTS — It is not treated, and when I got on to GWMW, GWMW will not say that it can be potable water because if they do say that and somebody gets sick, they are history. It is not treated water, so it is 'Do not drink' or 'Not suitable for drinking', which means that I cannot put a post-mix machine on because I need to tap into the water supply. I cannot put a coffee machine on unless I use a tank coffee machine rather than one that is plumbed in. We are trying to open up the hotel — half of it — as a cafe. We cannot do that until such time as I go and get tank water.

Mr O'SULLIVAN — Is there a plan for that to be rectified?

Mr ROBERTS — For the water?

Mr O'SULLIVAN — Yes.

Cr MILNE — I will make a comment if I can. Through the progress association, a number of years ago we asked GWMWater to come over and address the town. We looked at the option of piping water from Birchip treatment plant to Watchem, we looked at the option of supplying rainwater tanks to homes that did not have the rainwater catchment facility and we looked at the option of supplying all households with filters to take some of the sediment out of the pipeline water that we are currently on.

One of the options that GWM came up with was to put in, like they have in many of the little towns, two storage tanks, and they are rotated. They are used individually. They fill one while we are emptying the other. That gives the other one time to settle so that we get some sort of reasonable water, but certainly our piped water around town does not meet the standard. The end result of that is that for probably five, six or seven years we have had a GWM water trailer parked in the city, where people go and help themselves with plastic bottles, as was stated. That is the only answer we have at the moment. Given that there are 70 people in town and given that probably 50 per cent of them would have rainwater tanks, the others are probably people who could not afford a rainwater tank no matter how hard they tried. They would be older people and people on assisted income. So that issue will be ongoing for a number of years unless we can come up with a way of providing small towns with a small treatment plant that will do what we want it to do at a minimum cost that is cost-effective.

Mr O'SULLIVAN — Absolutely. Water is an essential. If you are talking about attracting people to your community, businesses to your community and so forth — and industry — water is pretty fundamental. So are you allowed to use tank water in the pub? You do not have to answer that if you do not wish to.

Mr ROBERTS — We do have a water tank. As I said, we bought the hotel in March. We do have a water tank. It is not plumbed in anywhere. I would not trust the water that is in it. If you had a look at my roof, that is another problem. I have a \$40 000 repair bill to fix the roof, so we will not go with the water tank just yet.

The CHAIR — We do have time. The Deputy Chair very kindly offered his spot for questions to other members of the committee. We do have time permitting, Deputy Chair, if you would like to fire away.

Mr RAMSAY — No, I am happy to share the love.

Cr MILNE — Jim has a small comment that he would like to make.

The CHAIR — Sure.

Mr PETRIE — As I said, I came to Watchem 13 years ago. I initially had the business that Ian has now got, and since then I have retired. In my previous life my skills were as a stonemason, and one of the projects that we came up with for Watchem was to do some nice entrance signs to the town. The previous speakers before us talked about red tape. For five years we battled with VicRoads to get these signs on the road. We have actually got the signs now, but nothing like what we intended to do in the first place. As I said, my skills are as a stonemason. I had the time, the energy and the will at that point in time to build these signs at a location which was well off the road. I travelled backwards and forwards to Ballarat, and you see beautiful signs going through the Northern Grampians shire, like in Avoca and all the towns right down that road, yet when it comes to the Buloke shire — it has nothing to do with Buloke, because it is VicRoads — we are not allowed to build something like that. As I said, we finished up with a sign, which is probably quite attractive, but it is nothing like what we wanted in the first place.

The second point in terms of doing projects, because that is what I have been involved in with the progress association: we started off wanting to do some work for the war memorial for the anniversary of the First World War period. It came to the point that to be able to do something for the 100th anniversary of Anzac we virtually had to put our hands in our own pockets, and we built what we found was acceptable to the community as being a good effort. Personally my involvement with the shire in that regard was absolutely first class, as a bloke doing a project.

The CHAIR — Was there an application —

Mr PETRIE — We got a lot of help; they waived a lot of fees, but it enabled us to do the project. At the moment we are still ongoing with that project and we have been fortunate enough after probably three years to

actually get a grant from the state government to go on with the project. But that is the sort of thing that takes a long time. You either give up or nothing gets done, but we got a lot of help from the council. They are stretched; we understand that.

Coming up from the city, before Buloke, the difference in life is phenomenal. Everything is just too easy down in the city. It is probably a fair comment to say that the city stops at Melton and then everything else, forget about it. That is all I have to say at the moment, certainly on the red tape thing. What is the difference on the same stretch of road between one shire and the next? I understand it is a VicRoads problem, not a shire problem.

The CHAIR — It sounds like some of those barriers are put in place and they make the greatest difficulty. Unless you are incredibly resilient and persistent, like you have been to get both the signs and memorial over the line, it creates a whole range of difficulties. Maybe there is an assumption that there are a lot of resources and a lot of time that can go into some of those applications, but the reality is that there just are not. Can I as the Chair take the opportunity to thank you, Jim, and Ian, Justin and Graeme for being here today and for giving your thoughts to the committee in answering our questions. Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.