

# **ENVIRONMENT, NATURAL RESOURCES AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE**

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

Traralgon — 9 October 2017

### Members

Ms Josh Bull — Chair

Mr Simon Ramsay — Deputy Chair

Ms Bronwyn Halfpenny

Mr Luke O'Sullivan

Mr Tim Richardson

Mr Richard Riordan

Mr Daniel Young

### Witness

Ms Coola Nassiokas, Secretary, Rosedale Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

**The CHAIR** — Good afternoon, and 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. I would like to extend a welcome to members of the public and any members of the media that may be present. 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 comments, you may not be protected by this privilege. Today’s evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript at the earliest opportunity. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee’s website. I now ask you to state your name and job title.

**Ms NASSIOKAS** — My name is Coola Nassiokas, and I am the secretary of the Rosedale Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you, Coola. We have got 30 minutes allocated for this session. I will ask for a 5-minute statement, which will be followed by questions from committee members. Thank you once again. Over to you.

**Ms NASSIOKAS** — Thank you for the opportunity to have some input into this inquiry. I would like to touch on the sustainability issues faced by rural and regional communities. Sustainability is a huge issue for everybody, mainly because nothing is certain or forever.

Businesses open and businesses close. Everything is transient. Foreign ownership in our bigger industries leaves us vulnerable in sustainability as we have very little control in how they are managed and head offices are usually overseas. So let me just state that sustainability, well, it is complicated. For Rosedale, we are a small community with all the pros and cons that all communities face. We have great community groups that work tirelessly for the greater good, and we have natural assets, a rich history. It would seem we have everything going for us, but like I said, it is complicated. A lot of towns in our region are reeling from massive closures of large employment bodies. Uncertainty is creeping in like a cancer, making its presence felt in every aspect: in spending, in investing, travel, impulse buying. Couple this with higher energy prices, insurance, rates et cetera — it is not an ideal environment for small business sustainability.

What can we do to make ourselves a little bit more sustainable? Well, in preparing for this meeting I did some research so I could best present our case, and I found a site that had six ways community groups can support entrepreneurship to attract tourism and boost the local economy: number one — start at the top, government level; number two, stick together, which is work together and support each other; number three, get online, and that is giving them the tools to communicate, help and share; number four, pool resources — that is, to promote each other; number five, play up your strengths, understand your local assets; and number six, run community events — events play a large part in the continued success of local businesses.

We in Rosedale started at number six. Events do play a large part in the continued success of local businesses. We proved this after our first event about four years ago. We saw a marked increase in foot traffic down our main street, in more social media engagement and even in real estate sales. People were talking about our town and visiting. For rural and regional communities, a major key to sustainability, we feel, is in tourism. We need to drive more tourists into our region by promoting our natural assets, by being who we are and promoting our town’s individual identity, by recognising our assets and by being entrepreneurs in creating events that will bring in tourists.

Success for self-sustaining rural towns depends on a united front, dedicated to building, celebrating and supporting all efforts in bringing tourists into our area. If we can do this, we will have thriving small businesses, and small businesses account for the largest share of total employment. So our biggest assets are our small businesses. With small rural communities driving sustainability in towns like we did, they create a momentum which builds and grows to create a very sustainable economy. So our answer to rural and regional sustainability is for councils to recognise tourism for what it is and to support in every way the towns that get on board to create this momentum. Together we can help ensure healthy, vibrant, sustainable regional communities. Thank you.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you, Coola, for that fantastic opening statement. I had a question in relation to categories of rates. My notes here indicate that Wellington Shire Council applies three rate categories: general, farm and recreation lands. They do not apply a commercial rate, but we know that neighbouring

municipalities — Mansfield, Baw Baw and East Gippsland shire — currently apply a commercial or industrial rate. Would you and members of your group be supportive of a commercial rate in Wellington?

**Ms NASSIOKAS** — I really do not have any information on that or experience in that, so I really cannot answer, and it is not something that I have put to our members, so I cannot answer on their behalf either.

**The CHAIR** — Sure, not a problem. The second part of my question just relates to the relationship that members and yourself share with the shire council. Is it a proactive, productive relationship?

**Ms NASSIOKAS** — It is a love-hate relationship. Yes, we have times when we get on really well, and sometimes, you know, things get a little bit uncomfortable. But on the whole, yes, we do seem to get on well together. On the whole we can get through to them, and they are more than willing to sit down and listen to us.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you.

**Ms NASSIOKAS** — You are welcome.

**Mr RAMSAY** — Thank you, Coola, for your presentation. I am just wanting to get a response. We have heard evidence from the group of councils this morning about shared services as a way to reduce costs and meet their rate cap. I am wondering do you have a view or does your chamber have a view in relation to potentially Wellington shire having a similar-type arrangement with like councils, geographically aligned?

**Ms NASSIOKAS** — The only issue that I came on was for the tourism — boosting tourism in our area. That is all we were taking out of this inquiry.

**Mr RAMSAY** — Okay. If I can pose a question on that basis then, what sort of potential do you see as improving the long-term viability and sustainability of Wellington shire to invest in the tourism area to enhance those opportunities?

**Ms NASSIOKAS** — Four years ago we did a tourism event down in Federation Square promoting our town and Gippsland in general — there were a few of us there. I would say 90 per cent of the people that came to our table did not even know where Gippsland was, let alone Rosedale, so we really need to promote our area. Gippsland is an undiscovered treasure chest. Nobody has really opened the lid on Gippsland, and we need to promote it in every way possible.

**Mr RICHARDSON** — Thank you, Coola, for popping in. I saw that you were in the gallery when the previous witnesses provided evidence, and there was a point put forward about Latrobe city prioritising tourism and attracting investment. Is there a need to look to ways councils link up across the board to try to improve this revenue stream?

**Ms NASSIOKAS** — Definitely. We are all in the same region. We really need to promote our area. We have so many natural assets. We have beautiful spaces where we can create events and we can all promote each other. If they come to Rosedale, they have to come through the Latrobe Valley, and then if they come through Gippsland, they can go to East Gippsland. We are all on the same highway.

**Mr RICHARDSON** — From your chamber of commerce's perspective, what are some of the things that could be that investment attraction? What could the council be doing more to better improve and attract some of those?

**Ms NASSIOKAS** — Something that will not really cost a lot is to help us with the red tape. When we first started we started with — I do not know if you have heard of our Man Cave Market — our Man Cave Market, and the next year it grew. We brought around 3000 to 4000 people into our town, which is double our population, on our very first event. The next year it was bound to grow even more, and it did: it doubled again. Then we got hit with all the red tape that is involved in putting on an event like that. We are only a small community but we had to do POPE reports. Has anybody ever done a POPE report? You know how hard they are to do. Nobody has done a POPE report.

It is a book like this, and you have to fill in all this stuff and answer all these questions. It is just a headache. Nobody was there to help us do this POPE report. How do we do a POPE report? What is a POPE report? We could not find anybody. Then we had to hire people, so our events are starting to blow out in cost — they are

not feasible, sustainable, anymore. If we could have some help with the red tape from council — if they could advise us how to do it instead of us having to pay outsiders to do it — it would help. That way the towns can run their events without it costing a lot of money, and it will bring tourism into the towns, which then will make the businesses more sustainable. It just kind of self-perpetuates, does it not? The momentum builds. If the momentum builds and it keeps on going, instead of squashing it on the head, keep it rolling.

**Mr O’SULLIVAN** — Does the Wellington council give the small towns enough assistance with running these types of events? Sometimes you need to be careful what you ask for from council, because you ask them to help and then they give you more red tape that you have to deal with. But the Wellington council, with some of their councillors, has been fairly supportive in that space.

**Ms NASSIOKAS** — They have been very supportive lately. I think even they were taken unaware when we started doing our events. They were not expecting them to be so successful. So I think they were worried — I am not sure, but maybe they thought we could not control them, but maybe if we work together, we could control the events and have them growing and being successful together.

**Mr O’SULLIVAN** — Because if you can get these activities running in a small place like Rosedale — and I know Rosedale reasonably well — it brings a whole lot of people into the regions out of Melbourne. So if you can promote yourselves well enough and have some decent events for them to actually take part in —

**Ms NASSIOKAS** — You just need people with vision, entrepreneurs, a few volunteers and a bit of support, instead of roadblocks, and you can create magic.

**Mr O’SULLIVAN** — Absolutely. An example of that up where I am from, up in the Mallee, is they have just undertaken — and the local council came up with the idea — with all the grain silos —

**Ms NASSIOKAS** — Yes, they were beautiful.

**Mr O’SULLIVAN** — painting pictures of local residents of some significance through the silo art trail, and that just brings an enormous amount of people up into those areas who would not visit any of those little towns.

**Ms NASSIOKAS** — Never.

**Mr O’SULLIVAN** — And a lot of those towns that have got those silos and that artwork have less than 100 people actually living in the town, and they have got flocks of people coming. So all you need is a couple of great ideas that you can work with that will attract people in.

**Ms NASSIOKAS** — That is right.

**Mr O’SULLIVAN** — Usually councils are pretty good at supporting those sorts of entrepreneurs.

**Ms NASSIOKAS** — When we started our first two events — the retro and then the man cave, the man cave just went absolutely fantastically. Then the next year it was just growing, because we have got a couple of people in it. We are only a small group, but we all work well together and everybody has their forte. We have Phoebe, who is really good on social media, so she pushes it out there, and it was just going absolutely fantastically. It was really good for the town. The real estate was selling blocks of land that were not selling for years. Houses were going. All our shops were full. We had traffic down our main street, people walking down our main street. Whereas before everybody thought, ‘Rosedale’s just a drive-through town’.

**Mr O’SULLIVAN** — It is not a drive-through town. It has got the best bakery in Gippsland.

**Ms NASSIOKAS** — There you go, but not a lot of people knew that about Rosedale.

**Mr RAMSAY** — That is a big call.

**The CHAIR** — That is a massive call.

**Ms NASSIOKAS** — They thought, ‘We’ll just drive through’. Then we would get people coming and saying, ‘We’re going to go to Rosedale for the day’, and that has all happened in the last four years.

**The CHAIR** — Coola, can we thank you for being here, for presenting to the committee. We greatly appreciate your time.

**Ms NASSIOKAS** — Thank you very much. Thank you for your time.

**Committee adjourned.**