

CORRECTED VERSION

RURAL AND REGIONAL COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the opportunities for people to use telecommuting and e-business to work remotely in rural and regional Victoria

Barwon Heads — 6 November 2013

Members

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Witnesses

Ms P. Manolis, chief executive officer, and

Cr A. Richards, board member, Geelong Regional Library Corporation.

The CHAIR — Welcome to the public hearing of the Rural and Regional Committee's inquiry into the opportunities for people to use telecommuting and e-business to work remotely in rural and regional Victoria. I hereby advise that all evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided under relevant Australian law. I also advise that any comments made outside the hearing may not be afforded such privilege.

Patti and Andy, for the benefit of Hansard, could you both give your names and business addresses?

Ms MANOLIS — Patti Manolis, chief executive officer of the Geelong Regional Library Corporation, 30 Brougham Street, Geelong.

Cr RICHARDS — Cr Andy Richards from the City of Greater Geelong and also the board chair of the Geelong Regional Library Corporation, City Hall, Gheringhap Street, Geelong.

The CHAIR — Patti and Andy, with your presentation, would you like questions as you go or at the end?

Ms MANOLIS — I have some information to give you, and then there are probably going to be some questions arising out of that. I also have a little show bag or kit for you to have a look at; that will make more sense after you have heard from me. I did actually want to ask whether you have heard from any other library people during this inquiry.

The CHAIR — We have heard from some councils that have libraries and discussed some aspects that could be done in libraries.

Ms MANOLIS — Great, that is good to know. I thought it would be good to give you a little bit, just a paragraph or two, about the Geelong Regional Library Corporation to give you a picture of the sorts of services that we provide to the community in the region. We were established in March 1997 under the Local Government Act and we have 16 libraries and 2 mobile libraries which operate across four member council areas, so that is the city of Greater Geelong, the borough of Queenscliffe, the Surf Coast shire and the Golden Plains shire, and it covers about 5000 square kilometres.

We are governed by elected representatives, such as Cr Andy Richards, from all member councils. Our funding is provided predominantly by our member councils but there is also some state government grant in there, some self-funded interest, fees and charges, and that kind of thing.

In the 2012–13 year — and there is more detail about this in our annual report — we were open for business a total of 726 hours per week, which is a good range of opening hours; welcomed 1.6 million visitors; loaned 2.7 million print, multimedia and e-books and databases; provided over 3500 reading literacy, digital literacy and information literacy lifelong learning programming to over 96 000 participants; provided over 192 000 hours of free public internet access from 152 internet access computers across our library network; provided 113 000 wireless hotspot sessions for people with their own mobile gadgets, such as laptops, other tablets and so forth; and we have photocopying, scanning and printing in all meeting rooms at our Belmont, Corio, Newcomb and Waurn Ponds libraries. That is just a bit of a picture of the service and infrastructure model.

In this coming year we are also rolling out 100 new iPads and tablets across the network for use by our community members in our libraries. In terms of some future opportunities, I just wanted to say that this is a timely inquiry given the rapidly increasing trend to telecommuting and mobile working. The public libraries are a natural partner and a potential provider of such services. Indeed we already experience a lot of use by businesspeople and by people who are working in a mobile fashion. They are pleasantly surprised and become regular users of the infrastructure and services provided by public libraries in our region.

We also have visitors to our region in between meetings using our facilities. They are a positive community infrastructure at the heart of communities. We are trusted organisations, safe spaces and able to assist with skilled staff in many ways including access to business information, business skills, digital literacy skills and so forth, and they represent an efficient use of investment dollars.

Just a little bit of information for you in terms of future plans for our libraries, you may know already that we have a new central Geelong Library and Heritage Centre about to commence construction. The site has been

cleared, so we will have 5000 square metres of public space with several meeting rooms and training spaces and we are offering a multiplicity of technology equipment, services and programs that will include spaces for videoconferencing, for example, and for a variety of individual and group, study and work purposes.

We have stage 2 of the Leopold hub coming on board, so there is potential there. I am looking at Rod — Cr Macdonald — because it is actually a development in his ward, so there is a potential there for inclusion of e-commerce and telecommuting services.

The Borough of Queenscliffe, which is a member council, is also developing more detail around their concept for a Hesse Street hub, which is going to see three separate organisations merge into one, all operating from one facility. We will have some leading edge technologies there. That is the library, the historical museum and the visitor information centre.

The Golden Plains Shire has received funding to extend the services of the Well community hub development in Smythesdale, so there is further potential for library partnership.

Extensive planning for Armstrong Creek includes a library. That is included in the G21 regional growth plan, and it is also included in the City of Greater Geelong's Public Library Buildings Development Strategy. We are looking at a library with a minimum of 3000 to 3500 square metres. The draft G21 regional growth implementation plan also includes expanded library services for Torquay, Corio, Lara, Drysdale, Ocean Grove and a new library in the longer term for Winchelsea — existing community infrastructure that could be used very effectively for these purposes. I might be going over the same ground here, but just in terms of telecommuting and e-business, we see that as a natural extension of what we already do in terms of democratising access to knowledge and information. You could call it, I suppose, a democratisation of entrepreneurship and giving people and individuals and groups in the community space and resources with which to develop their ideas and skills and, hopefully, successful businesses.

I just want to share with you some international best practice examples in libraries. I have three countries represented, if that is okay — if we have time for that. In Finland the Helsinki public library — I am not sure if I am going over ground you have already heard — have developed a concept called the urban office. A couple of their central libraries are offering urban office environments, as well as what we would call a regional city. They are not as geographically spread out as we are, obviously. They have these urban offices that are designed for the mobile worker in mind. They provide a receptionist to help with services, as well as equipment, bookings for meeting rooms, high-speed internet, wireless connections and access to printing. They have reservable meeting room tables and presentation equipment, including videoconferencing, as well as traditional services like office supplies — staplers and that kind of thing. Currently under construction they have a new central library, which will be about 10 000 square metres, where they will actually expand their open office idea.

The Netherlands saw a very interesting concept in their new Almere library, which is, I suppose, another regional location and part of their urban consolidation strategy to meet people in Amsterdam and other cities. What they have established is a meeting point called Seats to Meet, and it is actually mobile again — mobile workstations, meeting rooms, access to cafes and technology to undertake their work. In addition to that, they provide this booking system where you can announce that you are here, and other businesspeople who are working in the space can tap into your knowledge and skills, so there is an opportunity for exchange of skills and skill sharing and perhaps opportunity to develop business partnerships. While I was there recently I witnessed a graphic designer and a marketing consultant working together, and they had only met that day. It is a really interesting concept there.

One I have read about recently is that in Arizona in the United States public libraries are actually going to be rolling out a network of coworking business incubators in their public libraries. They are starting with a pilot in Scottsdale, so what their participating libraries would do is host dedicated working spaces, as well as formal and informal mentoring. They are going to do that in partnership with the local university. The librarians will also be trained to provide the training on an ongoing basis, building some sustainability for the skills development. They are calling it the Alexandria network, after the world's first and most famous library, because they refer to that as the original home for the self-starters and self-employed back in those times — philosophers and mathematicians et cetera. They are three key examples I thought I would offer, again, by way of demonstrating that public libraries are natural partners in this field.

The only other thing I really wanted to touch on is current internet capacity in our libraries. We are really very interested in seeing an improvement in the capacity offered to our communities, and to be able to improve services in this space we really are going to have to access much greater download and upload speeds than we are currently able to provide in our various libraries.

The CHAIR — Right. Andy, do you want to add anything?

Cr RICHARDS — I wanted to talk about a couple of local examples, for want of a better phrase. Looking at the local conditions in Geelong, especially around commuting and the future, we are getting the regional rail link in Geelong in 2016. To some degree that is going to improve the ability of the average resident to get to Melbourne and back again, but at the same time it is still going to take an hour and 10 minutes to get up to Melbourne and an hour and 10 minutes to get back. There is no particular fix at the moment, I do not think, for the West Gate Freeway situation. Going against that, however, in terms of the other prevailing economic conditions is that at some point residents in Melbourne who are paying a lot of money for a three-bedroom house on the outskirts of Melbourne are going to work out that they can buy a much cheaper house here in Geelong and either commute or possibly telecommute.

The northern suburbs of Geelong still offer two and three-bedroom houses for under \$300 000, which is under half the price of what you can buy a house for in Melbourne. This is going to become attractive at some point — maybe not now, but certainly in the next four or five years. Again, it is an attractive lifestyle down on the coast in Torquay and out on the Bellarine Peninsula. This will mean that people will want to move down here, but they will still want to be able to keep in touch with work in Melbourne. I see libraries as one of the key drivers within the community in terms of getting this situation up and running.

Obviously the market will take over at some point in the future as more and more businesses become digitally orientated, but one of the problems is around digital literacy. I am 44 years of age, and it is fair to say that although I am not completely up with Twitter I do know how to use it if I want to find out what a policy position of a political party is. I tend to look up the Twitter feed of the Liberal Party, the state government or the Labor Party. Usually if they have just made an announcement you can find it fairly quickly. That is uncommon, I think, for people over 45 years of age. I think as digital literacy in the community grows there will be more calls for this kind of thing.

I think the way that libraries are set up in the Geelong region is helpful. There are two main libraries in the suburbs, one in Corio and one in Waurn Ponds. We are building a new central library, which is going to have a lot of meeting space for people. There will be the capacity for people to get to a space they can learn in and use the new environment.

The CHAIR — Do the council and the libraries have a telecommuting policy, and if so, how many of their staff telecommute? I understand that it might be difficult in a library environment, given it is about service and if you are not there you cannot provide it. I would be interested to hear how you manage that.

Cr RICHARDS — My understanding is that through Enterprise Geelong, which is a reasonably new initiative of the City of Greater Geelong, we are putting together a digital strategy at the moment. The council has only just set up Enterprise Geelong in the last six to eight months, and I do not know if you have spoken to the executive director, Dr Russell Walker, but this is one of the first goals.

The CHAIR — I was actually wishing to look more at the employees of the council, because not all of their jobs would require them to be at their desks or in the office, so do they have a telecommuting policy that allows them to work at home two or three days a week if they are writing reports or the like?

Cr RICHARDS — I would have to say, I am unsure. Traditionally staffing is not necessarily a matter for the councillors, it is more for the CEO in a local government context.

The CHAIR — I thought as a councillor you might have known that there was a percentage of your staff that telecommute.

Cr RICHARDS — I think it would be quite low.

Ms MANOLIS — We do not know.

The CHAIR — Okay, so it is not an area in which the councillors have been active?

Cr RICHARDS — It is not a space we have been particularly active in, I do not think, but that is partly about digital literacy and partly about broadband speed and so forth.

Ms MANOLIS — We have a flexible arrangements policy that enables work from home, and it is worked out on an individual case-by-case basis. A lot of our work involves customer interface, so the staff actually have to be present, but there are staff in our headquarters, in administration and management, who definitely do take advantage of telecommuting. But we do not have a formal policy, so I had better get back there and write one! We operate telecommuting under our flexible work arrangements policy — our EA.

Mr HOWARD — Patti, in terms of the Geelong libraries under your administration, what is the average number of laptop or computer work sites in each library?

Ms MANOLIS — That actually varies considerably.

Mr HOWARD — I imagine it does.

Ms MANOLIS — For example, at Corio library, which is a larger library that serves a larger population base, we have 16 hard-wired PCs as well as a number of tablets on top of that. If you were to stop in next door to the Barwon Heads community library, for example, last time I looked I saw three computers there, but that is because it is a smaller space which is shared with the school, so it varies.

Mr HOWARD — I expected you would say it was somewhere around that. I am reflecting upon the library in Ballarat, for example, which I was in just the other day; it must have about 8 or 10 pods, which I noticed were fully utilised. Every time I have been in they have been fully utilised. In talking to us, as you have today, about further opportunities, I wonder how that could work, given the way most libraries that I have seen operate in this state. People love getting in there, partly because it is free. Clearly in the situation you are talking about, teleworkers would be looking to use a large block of time on computers. How could this possibly work in the library system, including the fact that it is free? Is there an opportunity to charge? How do you differentiate? How do you get those extra spaces that presumably you would need to be able to offer a significant increase in capacity?

Ms MANOLIS — That is right. Somewhere like the new Geelong library and heritage centre will be more able, in terms of space, to provide those services. When planning first started for that library and heritage centre we were looking at about 80 hard-wired PCs. That was some years ago. We are now reducing that to 40 because of the fact that we are really looking at multiplicity in terms of devices. Our main concern is to have really solid and high-capacity infrastructure to enable us to update as quickly as possible with the latest emerging technologies.

Most definitely fees would be part of the scenario. In fact Urban Office, the model I talked about from Helsinki, charges people a fee, depending on the level of service they are looking for — for example, a bit of rental for the workspace, that kind of thing, or accessing printing and technology.

Mr KATOS — Patti, you talked about Finland and Holland before. They are small places that probably have very rapid transport systems, which are probably a lot better than those we have in Australia. It is not that our transport systems are too bad, but they are obviously a lot better over there. Why are they embracing teleworking? They do not face the tyranny of distance like we do. Why do you think they are embracing teleworking more so than we are in Australia?

Ms MANOLIS — I think they are adapting to technology. One of the other considerations is the improvement in quality of life. There is so much research out there — I am sure you have examined it — around life satisfaction, work-life balance, those sorts of things. Work-life balance reduces significantly if you are spending all your time commuting. There is just a recognition that modern society needs more flexibility and the ability with technology to work wherever people might be — and innovation as well.

I take your point that they do not face the tyranny of distance. We would not have too many people commuting from way across the country. I think geography is still a great concern for them, particularly in the economic times they face at the moment. They still refer to the ‘crisis’ and are struggling under those difficult

circumstances, so I think it is about consolidation of resources and enabling people to tap into existing resources as far as possible, as well as supporting innovation in very difficult times.

Mr DRUM — As we build the libraries of today for the users of the next 10, 15 or 20 years, are we building them with a lot less focus on print and books? Are we building our libraries predominantly for an electronic future?

Ms MANOLIS — That is a very good question. I think there will always be hard copy materials, but we are most definitely undergoing a transition to digital resources. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions recently published a report on trends in libraries, and they are looking at a scenario of around 50-50 for hard copy and digital resources. Some people assume that that means we require less space, but what we are actually finding is that we need more, because people are needing those spaces to come to to engage with the resources via their digital gadgets and for meeting rooms and conferences and those sorts of things. It does not seem like a natural result to need more space, but in fact our modern libraries need more people space as opposed to the hard copy collection space.

Mr DRUM — I do not go to libraries often. I understand it would be a great spot to go to if I was just typing and doing transactions and work for myself. I am trying to gauge the activity that you are trying to encourage. Are you encouraging people to actually conduct their daily business and use meeting rooms for phone calls?

Ms MANOLIS — Yes, they do that already, but if we were able to provide better resources, I think that that could happen more successfully.

The CHAIR — By better resources you mean faster download and upload speed?

Ms MANOLIS — Faster internet and more dedicated space too would probably be the things where we might enable less competition with community members — for example, for bums on seats and that kind of thing.

Cr RICHARDS — You have to have technology that allows people to be creative, where you apply the high-end technology of today to basically let people design things and collaborate together.

Mr DRUM — Have you looked at any commercial partnerships, for instance with banks and universities? Have you looked at how a commercial entity might be able to help with the bricks and mortar and maybe even with ongoings?

Ms MANOLIS — We are exploring alternative streams of funding, but we are at the beginning stages of that. When I hand out my pack you will see that we have a new strategic plan and an annual report, and you will also be able to see our calendar of events and the increase in our digital literacy programming and other skills development courses. Libraries are very much lifelong learning organisations from birth all the way through to the senior years. Our spaces and the services that we provide need to be able to cover quite a variety of our community objectives and uses.

Mr DRUM — You were talking about Scottsdale, Arizona. What is the time line of that project?

Ms MANOLIS — When I read about it they were only starting to roll that out, but it was imminent. I am sorry I do not have a hard and fast date for you.

Mr DRUM — We should be able to find that, though.

Ms MANOLIS — Yes.

Mr DRUM — It was the Scottsdale library?

Ms MANOLIS — Yes, the library in partnership with the local university, but with the library itself providing the space and the services.

Mr DRUM — Great; thank you.

Mr HOWARD — Back to the question I asked before about your present library structure: do you find that there is much downtime on the equipment that you have at the moment?

Ms MANOLIS — Not really, no, because at various times of the day you get different groups of people using it.

Mr HOWARD — In fact the opposite might be the case sometimes: that you get some people who want to hog machines. How do you ensure that there is a turnover?

Ms MANOLIS — We have a booking system, and we currently have a maximum of 1 hour per day to ensure that we have equitable access.

Cr RICHARDS — We would like to be open more often on the weekends, I think, but funding is what it is.

Mr HOWARD — Are you open on Saturday mornings, for example?

Ms MANOLIS — Yes. Some of our libraries are also open on Saturday afternoons, and two of our libraries are open on Sunday afternoons.

Mr HOWARD — All right; you are moving into that space.

Ms MANOLIS — And evenings too. We are trying to expand that.

The CHAIR — Andy and Patti, have you got any final remarks you would like to leave with us?

Ms MANOLIS — No, I think that is pretty much it.

Cr RICHARDS — We appreciate your letting us come and talk to you.

Ms MANOLIS — Yes, thank you. It has been great.

The CHAIR — We would like to thank you very much for coming along and sharing with us what is happening in the libraries and at the local council. In about 14 days time a draft Hansard transcript will come from Lilian. You will be able to make corrections to obvious errors, but other than that it will be as it is. Once again, thank you very much. It was very pleasing to hear of the success of libraries in this area.

Ms MANOLIS — Thank you very much.

Cr RICHARDS — Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.