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THE LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION B COMMITTEE MET IN WEST COAST HERITAGE MUSEUM, ZEEHAN ON FRIDAY 22 MAY 2015

BUILT HERITAGE TOURISM IN TASMANIA

Mr PHILLIP VICKERS, WEST COAST HERITAGE, WAS CALLED, MADE THE STATUTORY DECLARATION AND WAS EXAMINED.

CHAIR (Mr Valentine) - Mr Vickers, for the record you might tell us your field of interest and your expertise, about being the Mayor of the West Coast.

Mr VICKERS - I am the Executive Director of a company called West Coast Heritage Limited - I have been chairman of the board since 2001 - the company that operates this facility is the West Coast Pioneers Museum.

I have been elected mayor of the West Coast Council since 4 November last year; State Director of Crime Stoppers Tasmania -

Mr FINCH - The list goes on.

Mr VICKERS - Goes on and on and on. Certainly, heritage and heritage buildings and the operation of this complex since 2001, if not a bit before that, is my primary job.

CHAIR - The evidence you are giving today is protected by parliamentary privilege, but I need to remind you that when you leave the hearing, that same privilege is not afforded if you are talking to the media or whatever.

It is being recorded and the *Hansard* version will be available on the website for the committee at a later point. Not tomorrow, but possibly in a week or two's time.

You have given us your written submission, which is fascinating to read for a number of reasons. My great grandfather helped build the Gaiety Theatre, so I have an interest in the Gaiety and it was interesting to read your submission. You now have the opportunity to make a verbal submission, so over to you and then we will ask some questions following that.

Mr VICKERS - For the committee's benefit, people in the gallery are all directors of West Coast Heritage - and two of them feature in the photographs in the submission, doing work.

Mr DEAN - If you wanted anyone of them to join you -

Mr VICKERS - I have asked them, but they are quite happy -

CHAIR - They are happy to sit by and let you make the bold statements.

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Mr VICKERS - Give me a score out of 10. I suppose in a nutshell, to cut to the chase, we are finding it increasingly difficult to actually maintain our heritage buildings. We have been in all talks with the government for over 15 consecutive years on having what we consider our miserly grant, perhaps indexed or attached to CPI or increased. We have had one increase in over 20 years.

CHAIR - What is that grant today?

Mr VICKERS - \$145 000 per annum.

CHAIR - Is that expected to come in this coming financial year?

Mr VICKERS - I believe it will come this financial year, yes. The previous government tried to cut us by 10 per cent in their last year and we circumvented that through political channels, so it remained at \$145 000.

Mr DEAN - Is that a recurrent amount? In other words, each year do you have to apply for it or does the government have to make that decision, or is it recurrent over a period of five years, 10 years?

Mr VICKERS - No. At one stage in the last 10 years, we had it set in three-yearly increments - we had two lots of that - but right at this time and previous to that three-yearly increment period, the Arts Advisory Board, I am told, makes a decision each year with regard to the allocation of x amount of funds and we are in that mix.

Mr DEAN - How does that allow you to program ahead, two years ahead, three years ahead, when your funding is only one year ahead each time? What does that do?

Mr VICKERS - It makes it extremely hard. Back in 2001, West Coast Heritage had been going for seven years and it physically ran out of money. There was a bit of a coup, for want of a better description - I became chairman of the board and a couple of the other directors have been with me on the board for that period of time, and we steadily each year built up a small cash reserve, which now sits at about \$280 000.

CHAIR - That is through takings?

Mr VICKERS - Yes, through door-takings and we run a gift shop. We have maintained that level of cash reserve for the past eight to 10 years, and that is how we get through, if you know what I mean. We budget for the \$145 000 to come through Arts Tasmania, and it traditionally has, but at the end of the day, if it suddenly does not, we can run for one year, for example, before we would have to make some alternative arrangements.

CHAIR - Years ago I was a trustee of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery - I think it was around 1995 or 1996, something like that - when it was first brought in under the Museum and Art Gallery.

Mr VICKERS - The Pioneers Museum started in 1963 and it was run by a committee of TASMAG, subcommittee under the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery.

CHAIR - Even that far back?

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Mr VICKERS - Yes. From 1963 to 1993, an old chap called George Smith was the backbone of the local committee here. He was in his 90s, and it was decided to set up a company called West Coast Heritage Limited. The concept behind setting up that company was that, well, George was going to pass away, and there was a need for change with the Pioneers Museum. At the same time Mt Lyell closed and 'bequeathed' Pengana and the Mt Lyell general office to the community so they could get a tax deduction. The titles for those two properties went into the National Trust's name and this company, the West Coast Heritage, was the middleman, the caretaker. The magic figure of \$135 000 was dreamt up in 1994 as a contribution towards the operating costs, with a vision that the company was going to be all to everyone in the realm of heritage on the west coast, and it failed from the start. It was underfunded, the board members were passionate people but not experienced in running a business, and it floundered along from 1994 to 2001.

CHAIR - Was George a relative of Philosopher Smith?

Mr VICKERS - No, he was a pinner originally - Strahan-orientated.

CHAIR - Your connection with the museum and art gallery now is only through Arts Tasmania? But you both came under that umbrella?

Mr VICKERS - Yes, and by virtue of that, the contents of our collection belongs legally to Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery.

CHAIR - It still belongs to the museum and art gallery?

Mr VICKERS - Yes, there is a legal grey area in that anything we have acquired after the company was formed in 1994 perhaps may not go down that track, but as a board we have taken the view that it is all part of the one collection. If we were to cease to exist, it would revert back to the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery.

CHAIR - Regarding what you acquire and how you manage the collection, I think you said \$138 000 of the \$145 000 was for maintenance. There is not a lot there, only a bit that comes through door sales. What is the state of the collection? Is it in a reasonable state or does it need a lot of maintenance work?

Mr VICKERS - No, the collection itself is in good nick. Our outside exhibits take a bit of looking after because of the weather. As far as our collection goes, our focus would be maintaining things such as the theatre and improving it. Since 2001 we have spent probably close to \$1 million on it.

CHAIR - On the theatre?

Mr VICKERS - Yes. The Tasmanian Community Fund has been exceptionally good to us over the years, and we got a T-QUAL grant through Tourism. We actively chase one-off grants to do work.

Mr FINCH - Do you have another application in at the moment to the Community Fund?

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Mr VICKERS - We currently have one with the fund, to turn our patio area into a library/research facility. It will be assessed next month.

Mr FINCH - If they have a vested interest, with help in the past, they would probably like to keep that ongoing themselves to support what you have here.

Mr VICKERS - The application process has got harder and harder over the years, but that is probably a reasonable thing.

In essence, that is where we sit. The closing paragraph in our submission notes that we are chugging along, but there will come a time when we really are going to struggle. A simple thing like the veranda floor leaking down into the lower level - we came up with an idea to stop it by putting the tin chute along there, but at the end of the day the cost of fixing it is outside our reach.

These buildings actually belonged to the Crown; from memory, they came to us in 2009, under the CLAC program, and said, 'We would like to unload them. We would like you to take it over and we will give you \$150 000 as a sweetener if you're prepared to go down that track.' It would be fair to say that my board was split pretty well 50:50, and it was probably me who talked them around. I said, 'If we don't take them over, we won't get the \$150 000'. With the \$150 000, or whatever it was, we painted all the facades and spent it all on maintenance. At the same time caveats are on the title, so if we cease to exist, they will revert back to the Crown anyway. In putting the argument to the ministers of the day and all the bureaucrats in Arts Tasmania, that 'What you put in now is what you won't have to put in in the future', does not seem to wash.

Mr DEAN - Have you a budget set up to bring this place - its veranda and outsides - back to a reasonable standard? What would you be looking at doing to bring it back to an acceptable standard moving forward?

Mr VICKERS - In my submission, the current essential maintenance plan, repairs and maintenance include painting the main street facades, \$72 000; sill repairs, \$37 000; and the balcony floor, \$29 000. We got these quotes probably a year or so ago.

Mr DEAN - How much of the funding provided to you - \$145 000 annually - are you able to save and put into maintenance? I would suspect not a lot.

Mr VICKERS - If you take two-thirds of my wage and the amount we spend on materials, maintenance and contractors, it would probably run close to \$150 000. That is purely on maintenance. That does not include volunteer work. I have two competent volunteers who volunteer Tuesdays and Wednesdays each week religiously. If you added that onto it, it would take it up even a lot further.

CHAIR - You get 17 000 visitors a year, roughly?

Mr VICKERS - Yes, 13 500 paying customers, which equates to about \$125 000. Our turnover with our extraordinary grants is about \$360 000, of which \$145 000 comes from the state. The balance of that is door charges and profit in our shop. Our wages bill is \$225 000 and the balance goes into goods and services, and that stuff.

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CHAIR - Do you collaborate with other tourism outlets to try to get business to come through here? Do you work with anyone in Strahan, Queenstown or Burnie, or any of those places?

Mr VICKERS - Yes, we have been an active player in the West Coast Tourism Association since its inception and its reinvention about three years ago now. I was chairman of it when it started up again. Tourism in this district is fragmented. Even with the Tourism Association, it has never been vibrant enough or congenial enough to come together and say, 'Well, let's market the west coast as a whole.' It might start off for a week like that, but then it goes a little pear-shaped.

CHAIR - It has lots of stories to tell, which brings me to the issue of industrial heritage. That is of interest to a lot of people, as is the mineral collection, and some of those things are inside, obviously - but then there are larger things in the landscape. Could more be made of some of those facilities to increase the interest in collaborating with other areas in the coastal region?

Mr VICKERS - There is certainly room to improve. The West Coast Council, in its budget next year, intends to employ an economic development state tourism officer, to try to pull west coast tourism together in the first instance.

CHAIR - There used to be one, wasn't there? Tim Shorten? He came to the Hobart City Council when I was there.

Mr VICKERS - Yes. That is history too. When the new West Coast Council started back in 1993, it invested \$180 000 in tourism, which was a lot of money.

Mr DEAN - What does Tourism Tasmania do for you? Is there any connectivity between you and Tourism Tasmania in promoting this area and promoting the sites, the heritage that you have? One of the reasons this committee was set up was to look at the lack of association between Tourism Tasmania and a lot of the major assets, drawcards, that we have in this state. This is one of them. Can you answer that question?

Mr VICKERS - I can, yes. There is none. In recent years the rules have changed dramatically. As I understand it, Tourism Tasmania no longer has anything to do with places like us or even local tourism associations. They set up this new structure and they said, 'We are going to have three regional tourism organisations which are able to talk to Tourism Tasmania.' The local tourism associations feed into the registered training organisations (RTOs), and people like us are supposed to feed in through our local tourism association. It is just an unworkable mess.

The north-west RTO - I was on that and resigned - was supposed to have a skills-based board. But the individual players around the table were too self-interested to allow a combined, or a big regional, approach to tourism on the north-west coast. There is a big difference between places like Stanley and along the coast, and the west coast. I think we have separate things.

CHAIR - Yet if people had the chance to go to Trial Harbour and see the boisterous seas - just the natural stuff - you would think there would be an interest in that.

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Mr DEAN - This area has so much heritage. It is steeped in what has made Tasmania, Tasmania. When you drive down, with some of the facilities at Renison, for a start, with the how the minerals were brought in - there is so much of it.

Mr VICKERS - The concept of west coast heritage was good when it was set up in 1993-94, but it was never given the resources to do the job it was set up to do. That is why it failed from the start. Had it been resourced in the right way - not just financially but with also with an initial board of directors with the capacity to achieve the vision - it would have succeeded and it could have become an overarching body to look after our heritage.

Mr DEAN - It is sad. This committee has recently been looking at funding as well. A number of suggestions have been put to us, and I will quickly run through some to get your views on them. One is that we should set up a lottery similar to those in Western Australia, in England and some other countries, specifically to support the maintenance of, and the right expenditure on, these buildings.

Another suggestion is that every person coming into the state should pay a levy of \$1 or \$2, or whatever, when they pay for their accommodation, which would then go towards maintaining our heritage. It would be paid to the Treasury or what-have-you. Another idea is that every tourist coming into the state should pay a levy at the ferry terminal or at the airport, \$1 or \$2 again. That money should go into a fund.

Another suggestion is that the gambling levy, currently 5 per cent of all gambling monies, which is taken by the government to support problem gamblers and other facilities and so on, could be increased to 6 per cent. We have talked about a number of scenarios put to us. I do not think we can expect government to simply stick its hand in its pocket to fund all of this right through. We have to look at another model, and I think the government will listen to us because, six or seven years ago, the Labor government itself looked at the lottery system.

Mr VICKERS - Yes. In my view, it would be a good thing if the Heritage Council was given sufficient resources to be an organisation that people like us could approach and say, 'Listen, we have this problem with this building, how do we fix it?' A lottery sounds like a good idea to provide the council with sufficient resources. The pokies, a bed levy - they are all good concepts. The money has to come from somewhere, I suppose, and the government just does not have bottomless pockets.

Mr DEAN - The more money you put into your heritage and getting it right, the more tourists that can attract. If we market things the right way, that will bring more people into the state for the purposes of looking at our wonderful heritage.

CHAIR - The gambling levy sits at 3 per cent at the moment.

Mr FINCH - Since the installation of the new Government, what sort of relationship do you have with your local members? What has been their reaction to discussions you have had with them about what you do?

Mr VICKERS - The Braddon backbenchers are a bit quiet. I can really probably say no more than that. I don't know - they are certainly conspicuous by their absence. Brooksy

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comes down a fair bit, but it is what it is. I have had a reasonably good relationship with Vanessa Goodwin, the Minister for the Arts. She took the trouble to write to us, replied to our request for a review and, in writing, said she had instructed the Arts Advisory Board to look at it. So we can only take that on face value at the moment. We will follow that up with her. Generally our dealings with the current Government have been good. I think they are trying.

Mr FINCH - By the same token, have you or your board made an effort to contact your local members? Have you invited them down here to see what you actually do? I am suggesting it's a bit of a two-way street.

Mr VICKERS - Prior to the last election, which was not that long ago, Will Hodgman brought the whole group here. He stood on the concrete path out there and said, when I explained to him about the grant business, 'You should be getting half a million dollars a year now, Phil.'

Mr FINCH - I will just make a note of that - we have it on *Hansard*.

Mr VICKERS - It is true. That was the exact figure. He said, 'What a great facility', and away they went.

Mr FINCH - When I look at the responsibilities you people have taken on, like this streetscape here, \$145 000 seems paltry.

Mr VICKERS - Well, it is.

Mr FINCH - It is not really the support you need to keep going. My point is that we have to be careful because you people are going to burn out. If you are not given encouragement, you are going to say, 'Well, hang on, what are we doing here?'

Mr VICKERS - You have made a very valid point because I think we are actually close to that point. I lost the plot at the last two board meetings, and I have never done that in my life.

CHAIR - What do you mean by that? You lost your temper or you just sort of sat there dumbfounded?

Mr VICKERS - I went blank and said, 'I'm over it.' We were arguing around the table about ways and means of getting more visitors through the door. There is not something that we have not tried, so as a result of that we have re-engaged a lady called Sarah Lefsky to do a desktop study, and look at our marketing and stuff like that.

CHAIR - Where is she from?

Mr VICKERS - She is from Launceston.

CHAIR - Is this the roving curator-type role that we -

Mr FINCH - No. She studies tourism. She was part of that heritage -

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CHAIR - I remember the name.

Mr VICKERS - As a board, we got to the point where I was instructed to tell the Government that we were going to wind the company up. It was a veiled threat and I did not say it word perfectly, but that is where we got to as a board. The frustration gets pretty high.

Mr FINCH - That is the sense I get, that if support is not shown to you, people are going to say, 'It has fallen back on our shoulders and we are not being encouraged here.'

Mr VICKERS - On a personal note, I probably had the opportunity to run the Wilderness Railway full-time when I went there for eight months to restart it. I chose not to because I did not want to leave here, because I thought, 'What will happen?'

CHAIR - I would like to talk to you briefly about volunteers - the number you have and the prospect of getting other volunteers in the future as people get older and basically do not want to do it anymore. Can you give us a picture of that?

Mr VICKERS - It is a decreasing line. We have never been great on volunteers. We have optimised work-for-the-dole schemes over the years. The rules are changing on 1 July and they become attractive for us again.

CHAIR - So no young people coming up?

Mr VICKERS - No. My trusty volunteers are all getting older, unfortunately. The tendency now is that people no longer want to volunteer.

CHAIR - Is there anything you are burning to tell us before we close?

Mr VICKERS - The point was made that we will burn out unless we can get ourselves into a better situation. We do not want \$1 million or \$2 million; we just want acknowledgement that whatever funds we ask for are going to be well spent.

CHAIR - If you wish to provide us with any extra information after this hearing, you may do so, probably up to the end of September, so bear that in mind.

Mr DEAN - What has happened to the committee Adam Brooks was leading to provide employment opportunities on the west coast following the demise of Mt Lyell? What opportunities did you have to put any of these things to that committee? The government at that stage was calling for good projects that would employ people and that would be extremely beneficial to the west coast and this area. Was anything like this put up? Is there still an opportunity to put something like this before the Adam Brooks committee?

Mr VICKERS - I am still under privilege?

CHAIR - You are under privilege.

Mr VICKERS - Let me say this: Adam came to the west coast when Mt Lyell closed to set up that committee. He picked three people to have on that committee. They called for submissions from the general public. Over 250 ideas were submitted to them, verbally

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and in writing. They then came up with about six things that I do not think reflected any of the ideas that were submitted.

We did not submit an idea on behalf of West Coast Heritage, but I have since had to pick up the end of that committee's work. That is partly why the council has now embarked on a community plan looking forward 10 years, so that next time something like this happens on the west coast - a mine shuts, people become out of work - the council will be able to say, 'If you want to do something for the west coast, have a look.' It will show we are ready.

Mr FINCH - I want to ask about the Gaiety Theatre. Is it operational? Can it put on shows?

Mr VICKERS - Yes, tomorrow.

Mr FINCH - All the insurance would be covered, and all occupational health and safety processes are all in place?

Mr VICKERS - Yes. What we cannot do is underwrite any losses that the show might have by virtue of not a lot of people turning up. Two years ago we ran three shows that we brought out of Melbourne, and we lost \$30 000 because we had to underwrite them. We have since taken the view that we cannot financially do that, so the board now will provide theatre facility for next to nix, but we will not underwrite any losses.

Mr FINCH - Does the regional touring, regional arts, do they bring shows through?

Mr VICKERS - Ten Days on the Island is about the only regular thing that appears here. The Tasmanian Ballet Company used to come every year, but they are in recess, unfortunately.

Mr FINCH - Have you spoken with MONA?

Mr VICKERS - No.

Mr FINCH - Have a try. See if they might be interested - with the history of this place - in the opportunity to do something a bit different here.

CHAIR - We are out of time. Thank you for putting your submission forward. It is very important - it is important to the west coast, I am sure. This committee can only make recommendations to the Government. We will deliberate on what we have heard during the inquiry and come up with what we believe are good recommendations that we would hope the Government considers.

THE WITNESS WITHDREW.