

EUROBODALLA SHIRE COUNCIL

PUBLIC FORUM

All members of the community who have registered have been advised that they have a **maximum of five minutes** to put their case.

Ordinary Meeting of Council on 8 September 2015

Name	Subject/Comments
Public Access Session – 9:30pm	
Nil	
Agenda Items – 10.00am	
David Seymour obo Batemans Bay Chamber of Commerce	GMR15/027 Visitor Services
Laurelle Pacey	GMR15/027 Visitor Services



PRESENTATION TO EUROBODALLA SHIRE COUNCIL – VISITOR SERVICES APPRAISAL

REPORT GMR15/027 – COUNCIL MEETING - 8 September 2015

This presentation to Eurobodalla Council is made on behalf of the Batemans Bay Chamber of Commerce and Industry and is in reference to the report on the future of Visitor Information Services currently under review.

In the first instance, the Chamber would take this opportunity to commend Council on instigating the review of these services and exploring other avenues to provide this very necessary service. We would also acknowledge the dedicated and excellent work undertaken by the staff of Eurobodalla Tourism over the years, in promoting this region both nationally and internationally.

As a representative organisation of business people within the Shire, we fully appreciate the need to regularly examine how an organisation undertakes certain tasks, especially within an environment of increasing change. Certainly in terms of how we gather information, disseminate that information and also importantly, how visitors seek and receive that information is very different today than even five years ago. From the discussion material the Council has already provided in reviewing this aspect of visitor information, it is evident that the role of information provision is very different and needs to be provided in the most efficient and effective manner.

It is to these issues of efficiency and effectiveness that we believe are at the core of what Council is endeavouring to do in this review.

There is no doubt that tourism is the primary economic driver for the Shire and therefore we should take all reasonable action to ensure that those services that directly enhance and grow tourism participation, are effectively targeted. How visitors access information in their trip planning, prior to arriving and when they arrive needs to ensure that both the most appropriate information is accessible and that information is aimed at the right market. Electronic information provision is undoubtedly the most efficient way to achieve this and should be supported particularly when the local businesses and community are the direct beneficiaries of that economic return and in part funding the provision of the service in the first instance.

However, a note of caution is needed in this rush to embrace a new world of digital wisdom. As a society we are still in transition and some of us are not as progressed in this brave new world of small screen impulsion. Therefore, in whatever form our future provision of visitor information may evolve, we believe that some form of physical and identifiable visitor information portal is necessary. The discussion on this issue to date, as offered in Council information papers, has suggested several options for this to continue, all of which have varying merit. However, the Chamber believes that in whatever future form and service this offer may eventuate, the need for on-ground, visible and recognisable tourist information should be part of the mix.

The report before Council today suggests in part, that Council seeks expression of interest for the future operation and service provision of visitor information. In this regard the Chamber would strongly support Council in moving toward a different model of the service provision. It would not have gone un-noticed to Council's current tourism staff, that the trend to out-sourcing of this facility is indeed now quite accepted. Tourist information centres in Tamworth, Goulburn, Victor Harbour in South Australia and Broom in Western Australia are all managed by independent organisations. However, in moving forward we should recognise the continuing work and marketing to be managed through Council's tourism staff, and in whatever form this physical offer is to be provided, it should, as noted in the prior discussion, be undertaken in collaboration with Eurobodalla Tourism.

In conclusion the Chamber would commend the report today as drafted and provide our continued support to the tourism staff and Council in achieving an efficient overall approach to enhancing visitor services to Eurobodalla coast region.

Batemans Bay Chamber of Commerce and Industry

EUROBODALLA SHIRE COUNCIL MEETING

7-Sep-15

PUBLIC FORUM - GMR15/027

TOURISM VISITOR SERVICES PROPOSAL

Thank you Mayor, General Manager and councilors for this opportunity to address you today on the report on Tourism Visitor Services Proposal.

I preface my comments by saying no one disputes Visitor Information Centres everywhere are operating in a changing environment and need to adapt to the more digital economy. Their role is changing.

Numerous studies around Australia have explored the value of VICs and the ways they can adapt to the more digital world. But **nowhere** across Australia are there moves, particularly in multi-award winning regional destinations like ours, for local government to pull out of operating and staffing visitors centres.

OVER 80% of accredited VICs in Australia are run by local government, with the majority of others having some kind of local government support.

I do welcome Council's response to industry concerns about the independence and quality of advice from any third party who may be interested in operating VICs, by ensuring these concerns are addressed.

Just to put Eurobodalla's efforts in some kind of context, Destination NSW's latest figures show that NSW visitor numbers have slightly increased over the 12 months to September 2014.

However most of you would no doubt be aware that these figures also show that since December 2008, unlike our neighbouring shires Shoalhaven (slight increase) and Bega Valley (fairly steady), visitor numbers to Eurobodalla continue to trend downwards. ~~Something is obviously wrong.~~ Why is it so?

Nothing I have seen presented to you examines the reason for this. **But to do nothing is obviously not an option.**

Perhaps it has something to do with the fact there has been no real increase in the tourism budget for over 10 years. That's despite tourism being the shire's biggest single industry, earning over \$388m a year and employing between 25 and 30% of our workforce. In Narooma it is THE only industry. Perhaps instead of divvying up the current budget, Council should instead be looking to increase the tourism budget.

I note the statements in today's report that:

1. 80% of people who made submissions want VICs to remain in the Eurobodalla.

I take that and the report's drift to mean Council is totally committed to keep VICs open, albeit possibly operated by a third party.

2. The Tourism Advisory Committee asked back in November that any option to replace the current model must be a robust alternative that supports the tourism industry.

No definitions were provided but most people ^{SHM}would expect some kind of cost-benefit analysis. Yet the current model has already been gutted by removing the booking system before any rigorous assessment or benchmarking could be done.

3. 'The extensive community engagement' undertaken over six weeks. I venture to say that most people would regard it as too late, too little and too structured.
4. Any future operator has to provide Wi-Fi for tourists and others. Why hasn't that been provided already?

Focusing on Narooma's VIC

Using industry figures, 12.3% of people who visited the southern part of the shire in the year ending September 2014 went into the Narooma VIC.

That's based on:

1. *the latest figures from Destination NSW*

2. Corrected door counts from Narooma Visitor information Centre for that time, using the Tourism Manager's correction factor, that equates to about 50,000 people.
3. The total number of visitors to the Eurobodalla is estimated at 1.22m (Tourism Research Australia figures to Sept 2014 – based on an Australia-wide survey). Considering the manner in which these figures are determined, it would not be out of order to suggest that one-third of visitors to the shire visited the southern part of the shire.

I note the report's acknowledgement that using VICs is highly correlated with longer stays and higher spend. **Using the latest industry accepted figures with Narooma VIC's corrected door count to September 2014, that could be worth over \$8m a year.** That's added value, after on line/phone bookings of accommodation, tours etc.

There is widespread concern in the Narooma business and wider community about Council's management of this issue

1. Some view it as a huge public relations disaster – why risk it to save a net \$200,000 in a Council budget of \$100m. Part of this seems to be due to Council's not fully appreciating the origins of Narooma's VIC and the community's strong sense of ownership.
2. Strange way to run a business – cut the main revenue stream by doing away with bookings and cutting this connection with stakeholders before any rigorous examination of the current model was done. Nett result, increased cost to council.
3. Council spent all that money on landscaping around the VIC to improve its visibility to visitors...
4. Council's treatment of its trained professional staff – not a model of good human resource management

With regard to Narooma's Lighthouse Museum, the report does not mention that the principal lender is the Australian Maritime Safety Authority. It has entrusted significant lighthouse artefacts including the lens from the original lighthouse lens to the care of Eurobodalla Shire Council. In 1988 the lens alone was valued at about \$2m. Since then more artefacts have been added. I venture to say their combined value would have to be over \$4m today. Some discussion has no doubt occurred with AMSA that Council may be passing over their care to a third party but it is not in the report. The Lighthouse Museum would of course not be able to be used by a third party for anything other than a Museum.

There is also concern over the Tourism Unit's ~~ability to deliver.~~

*with
corrected figures*

1. Concerns about the content, ease of use and reliability of Eurobodalla Tourism's new website.
2. There is almost a blind trust that putting money into tourism marketing activities on the web and digitally will deliver results. No doubt there is a detailed marketing plan (including performance objectives) somewhere of how the planned savings will be spent. It may help if that is made public.
3. Eurobodalla Tourism's current holiday guide. There are three huge points of difference that don't feature, concern about product knowledge
 - the multi award winning Montague Island and its various tours (most recently the
 - Mogo Zoo
 - the Tilba area and River Cottage Australia.
4. Concern about level of accreditation. Any third party MUST be required to operate as Level 2, i.e. open seven days a week for a minimum of 43 hours.

Council has already reduced our VICs' accreditation from Level 1 to 2 by cutting hours. which means they have to be open a minimum of 43 hours, anything less than 43 hours it drops to a Level 3.

The way forward...

1. I remind you of the Tourism Advisory Committee's request that any option to replace the current model must be a robust alternative that supports the tourism industry. Urge free and open discussions with stakeholders, rigorous economic analysis of current operations including VICs.
2. Council consider increasing its tourism budget, based on a comprehensive and detailed plan of how Eurobodalla Tourism sees it can best market the region pre-holiday to increase visitor numbers long term and visitor spend.

Thank you.