



Submission to Great Ocean Road Taskforce

The Apollo Bay Chamber of Commerce notes that the Taskforce has as a term of reference:

Make recommendations on governance reforms to protect the distinctive landscapes, improve the visitor experience and attract investments that benefit both tourists and local communities.

We seek that the taskforce recommendations addresses a solution that will swiftly address the problems that currently exist in Apollo Bay.

Introduction

Apollo Bay is seen as the mid-point of the Great Ocean Road and, as such, the town sees a large throughput of tourists, both domestic and international. A large proportion of the international tourists travel via coach services with their ultimate goal being a visit to the Twelve Apostles.

Apollo Bay has therefore become a very popular rest stop for tourists. In general, tourists spend only a brief amount of time in the town, grabbing a quick take away meal and taking a toilet break.

The resultant impacts on the town include:

- a huge number of buses passing through and requiring parking;
- heavy use of a small number of public toilets;
- little positive economic impact other than for a limited number of food outlets;
- a significant level of littering and other pollution.

The Apollo Bay Chamber of Commerce has long held the position that several strategies are needed to gain more economic benefit from this increasing tourist traffic. The chief among these are:

- additional tourist attractions for day visitors;
- Improvements to amenities, streetscape and traffic management, including dedicated bus parking, to make the town more welcoming to international visitors;
- an increase in high quality accommodation to encourage longer stays.

Destination Action Plan

The Chamber has recently worked with the local community to develop a Destination Action Plan to establish clear priorities for the town over the next three years.

The plan includes the following goals:

- Achieve a workable, sustainable and funded solution to the issue of bus parking, visitor toilets, streetscape, other amenities and associated traffic management/flow;
- The development of walking and riding trails, particularly the proposed Wild Dog to Skenes Creek Discovery Trail as well as re-opening Marriners Falls to the public;
- Cement the iconic cultural events such as Seafood Festival and WinterWild into the annual calendar;
- Advocate for the dredging of the whole of the Apollo Bay Harbour to its maximum working depth, so as to both maintain it as a working fishing harbour and major visitor attraction.

The Chamber has experienced difficulty in pushing through reforms in these areas due to the current governance arrangements. In many instances involvement is required from up to half a dozen independent agencies, including the Shire, DELWP, Otway Coast Committee and others.

Some specific examples of difficulties encountered to date include:

Harbour Dredging

This has been a hot issue for both professional fishers and recreational fishers and other boat operators for some time. The silting up of the harbour mouth, in particular, is seen by the fishing industry figures in the town as becoming far more than an inconvenience, but getting to the stage where a fatal accident could occur. The Shire, DEWLP and VFA are all in part responsible for this facility.

Bus Parking

Once again, this is a long-standing issue in the town. There are often 40 or more large coaches in the town at any one time as well as smaller 10-20 seater vehicles. There are very few specifically allocated bus parking places and no drop-off/pick-up points for tourists. This situation leads to illegal parking, traffic blockages and added risk to pedestrians. Resolving this issue requires coordinated involvement of the Shire, OCC and Vic Roads.

Cultural Events and Festivals

The Chamber now manages two major festivals, The Apollo Bay Seafood Festival and WinterWild. Both events have a large component of outdoor, public activities and performances. Events that cover both the foreshore and harbour and/or foreshore and GOR require permits and permissions from the Shire, OCC and Vic Roads. In the case of WinterWild, due to its duration, a permit was also required from DEWLP.

Public Toilets and Picnic Shelter

Public toilets in the OCC are inadequate in number and are often poorly maintained. One foreshore toilet block in Marengo had to be demolished due to undermining due to erosion. The OCC funding model does not appear to support capital works, such as additional toilet blocks. One case in

particular showed up the bizarre nature of agency demarcation: A very run-down picnic shelter on the foreshore was found to be 80% on Shire land and 20% on OCC land, leading to long delays in its renovation. It was only through the spirited lobbying of one local that led to any progress.



Apollo Bay foreshore picnic shelter

Key Problems

- The coast side of the road is currently the responsibility of the Otway Coast Committee (OCC) and the other side the Colac Otway Shire;
- Our parkland and public toilets are not the responsibility of the shire, but instead OCC;
- The GOR in town and the road reserve are the responsibility of the Shire. The road reserve on the coast side averages 3 metres from the tarmac but can be considerably more in some places. DELWP advised the Chamber that the picnic shelter sat 80% on the road reserve even though the OCC had viewed it as their responsibility;
- The OCC operates under a funding model that has resulted in it having well short of the resources required to do the job. It has a dependence on revenue from camping grounds that are not lucrative. By comparison, the adjoining coast committee GORRC has a budget 10 times that of OCC yet has responsibility for a similar length of the coast. This is due, in part, to having very lucrative caravan parks.
- The Shire has until recently been very Colac-centric. A recent finance study by the Shire found that for 2017/18 while Apollo Bay contributed 22.6% of rates revenue, it received only around 12% of the operating expenditure;
- Erosion is impacting our assets such as toilets and walking paths;
- In recent times the Apollo Bay economy has suffered with the closure of the GOR due to fires and landslips.

A Potential Pathway to Change

An obvious impediment to any genuinely new approach to the Governance of the region will be the requirement of additional funding.

Local residents should not be saddled with additional rates or charges that are primarily for the provision of services and infrastructure for visitors. It is the Chamber's observation, through various workshops and feedback, that locals are open to a new revenue-raising model that addresses this issue.

If such a model can be put in place, it makes sense to put this at the beginning of any transition process. The Chamber supports a model based on a permit or tax on visiting cars and buses. This has

the potential to raise very significant funds, could be set up in a short time-frame and then used to fund further reforms. So as not to tie this to a specific existing authority, this could be managed initially by a state government 'office', something that can be brought into existence in a short timeframe and without new legislation.

With an ongoing revenue raising system in place, the focus can then turn to creating a more unified governance entity that recognises that the GOR is a consistent economic, environmental and cultural region with unique needs.

The Chamber notes that better data is urgently required around traffic in the region - how much is international, how much is interstate, how long are vehicles staying in the region, what routes are they taking etc. This information is essential to make meaningful decisions about major infrastructure developments. It is also information that would be gathered as a matter of course through an innovative vehicle permit system.

Locals in the region will not accept a solution that does not significantly reduce the number of authorities acting in the region. The abolition of coastal committees would be an achievable goal in the short term.

A Governance Solution

That the five main governance bodies in our region be reformed into two.

That the shires of Surf Coast, Colac Otway and Corangamite are replaced with two –

1. A coastal shire with the GOR at its centre and taking over the coast responsibilities of Otway Coast Committee and Great Ocean Road Coast Committee.
2. An inland shire with the Princes Highway at its centre and extending from Moriac in the east and Terang in the west

The saving of five sets of management and administrations will make for a more cost efficient situation.

The coastal shire by its nature will have a focus on the economic development of tourism-related business as well as having a respect for the unique environmental conditions.

We do not see that this as necessarily an alternative to having a lead GOR agency. What we are concerned to see is that the main land and amenity manager is focussed and resourced to quickly deliver the necessary amenity to cater for our burgeoning tourist and community demand.

A preference would be for a model that results in a body that reports directly to a government minister and is not lost within an existing government department.